

THE GLAD IRONY  
OF  
THE GOSPEL

Warren Carr

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# THE GLAD IRONY OF THE GOSPEL

Sermons Preached  
at  
Wake Forest Baptist Church

Warren Carr



# CONTENTS

Preface	v
1. Why Join the Church?	1
2. Tribulation and Good Cheer	9
3. Self-Denial and Christian Service	15
4. The End of Parochialism and the Church-Related College	21
5. He Died. So What?	31
6. On Not Loving Everyone All the Time	37
7. The Word From Above and the Word From the Side	43
8. Job Backs Down	49
9. To Act Is to Compromise	55
10. Evangelism at the Exits	63
11. A Theology for Ethics	69
12. Christ Undeviating	75
13. Easter's Glad Irony	81
14. The Third Day and The Last Day	87
15. The Theological Basis for Inclusiveness	93
16. Christians and War	101
17. On Prayer, The Jews, and Bailey Smith	107
18. Gratitude Is a Decision	113
19. Mother?	119
20. A Decalogue of Manifestoes	125
21. Words From An Angry Bible Believer	131
22. Who Slammed the Door to Noah's Ark?	137
23. Love and Taking Orders	143
24. Tragic Outcomes From Broken Promises	149
25. Advent and Confession	157
26. God Bless America—Please	163
27. The Lord's Supper	169
28. The Good News of Judgment	175
29. Join the Church	181
30. Things I Can't Preach and You Can't Hear	187

31. The Community of the Cross	195
32. On Doing the Morally Possible	201
33. The Symbolic People of God	207
34. Guilt and Forgiveness	213
35. On Explaining Ourselves to God	219
36. Character	227
37. Experiences of Joy	235
38. Loyalty	241
39. The Sins of Missing Church	247
40. A Gospel of Grace and Judgment	253

## PREFACE

Warren Carr is, heart and soul, a preacher of the Gospel. This selection of his sermons is intended to reveal how consistently the Good News has been both the joy and the burden of his preaching. The Retirement Committee of the Wake Forest Baptist Church commissioned this book to help celebrate Warren's twenty-one year ministry here. It is meant as a tribute to Warren for his unapologetic proclamation of the Gospel. This collection of his preaching is also presented as a gift to his parishioners in the Wake Forest Church, to his many friends in other places, and to the larger public that has not yet heard his glad message.

Many generous people have helped bring this project to fruition. Following a suggestion from Don Reeves, the editors sought the assistance of Ernestine Godfrey at Hunter Textbooks. She gave freely of her time to help make the myriad choices concerning publishers, print types, paper selection, and the like. As copy editor, Ed Friendenberg has been especially valuable in providing his expert advice on all of these matters. His daughter Adela entered the entire text onto computer disks, and Ed himself gave it final editorial revision. Becky Nail brought to the task of copy editing her superb skills as a professor of English. Reggie Kiser, our printer representative from the Delmar Company, was patient and cooperative in guiding the book to its final form.

It is a testament to the solidity of Warren Carr's 45-year career in Baptist ministry that he has pastored only five churches. The ministers and secretaries of the four other churches have kindly provided the pictures and memorabilia that appear on the insert pages. Anne Kesler Shields, who has given the church her splendid portrait of our minister, also provided the photograph of Warren and his beloved companion in ministry, Martha Carr.

During his twenty-one years as pastor of the Wake Forest Baptist Church, Warren Carr has preached nearly a thousand sermons. In

making this small selection from so rich a treasure, we have sought to reveal the recurrent themes of his proclamation. It is our conviction that his repeated Biblical emphases are also the vital core of Christian faith. The utter primacy of God's grace — and thus its necessary tension with worldly justice and human merit — is the reiterated message of his preaching.

From this central premise follow the theological corollaries that keep recurring throughout these sermons. The church as the Body of Christ mediates the grace of God through its ministry and worship; divine revelation is not rooted in humanistic love or innate reason. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, is the source of the Gospel; it is to be gratefully heard and prayerfully obeyed at every point in the believer's life. The mercy of God, given by his goodness alone, establishes true community for men and women of all races and creeds. The Gospel is never to be identified with any political or moral cause, not with any party or nation — no matter how noble and right. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Christians live in the world with hope and joy because they believe in the coming of the Kingdom.

It should be remembered that Warren Carr is pre-eminently a preacher rather than a writer: a man whose voice and not his pen is the chief means of his message. Those who have seen and heard him in the pulpit know that he does not preach from a manuscript. More remarkable yet is his ability to dispense with even an outline. This is less the sign of a photographic memory, we believe, than the mark of a man radically freed by God to proclaim his Word. What we have here are not transcripts of Warren's preached sermons, therefore, but a record of his *preparation* for preaching. Yet because they were written for the ear rather than the eye, these sermon drafts convey the power of his proclamation. They will serve, we hope, as a grateful remembrance of Warren Carr's ministry in our midst. Better still, they will enable readers to hear, once more afresh, the glad irony of the Gospel.

Marcus Hester, editor

John Sykes, Richard Vance, Ralph Wood, associate editors

# Why Join the Church?

*September 1, 1983*

*Isaiah 6; Ephesians 3:1-13*

I had a horrible dream the other night. It was so far removed from reality as to border on the psychotic. I dreamed that 150 people joined this church on this very Sunday. We even ran out of pencils. Had it not been for the fact that I had taken some medicine to repel a squadron of allergies trying to overcome my nasal ramparts, I would have been all the more frightened. And yet I am not sure why, for in my waking hours, every Lord's Day at the close of the sermon, I come to the floor level and offer what we call the invitation to become a Christian, to seek baptism into Christ, to renew relationship with the church. I do that faithfully with no idea that anybody will respond on any given Sunday; I do that faithfully when there is no reason for me to believe that anybody is going to join the church. I do that regularly because it is a part of the faith and of the worship. And I continue to do it at a time and place in history when the question, Why join the church? is largely rhetorical, made rhetorical mostly by those people who have the answer: "There is no good reason in our society, given our world, for joining the church."

If one is to approach that question, it is necessary to realize that the question these days inevitably must be raised and answered in the context of civil religion. It is a society with its own civil religion, the religion of the civilization, the religion that permeates and spreads throughout the warp and woof of the culture — it is that kind of civil religion which suggests that there is no longer any reason for joining the church. It used to be that the church had to defend its character. People kept saying, "The church is full of hypocrites." Now one of the blessings of civil religion is that since

people outside the church also claim to be religious, we find that the church is not alone in being characterized by hypocrites.

So the church is reduced to a new kind of defense. It needs no longer defend its character as much as it needs to defend its necessity. For you see, we live in a time when so many people say, "I do not need the church; I do not need the prompting of the pulpit nor the words of scripture nor the dogmas of the church, to convince me that I should take my stand against all kinds of social evils." Anything from child pornography to the waste of nature is now being engaged by people who want this to be a decent world in which to live. Such people say, and I think rightly so, that they do not need the church to brace them up in the battle against war and discrimination and political corruption and ineptitude. There is nothing at present which the church can say which will prompt them or motivate them or encourage them in that kind of endeavor; they are able to do it by themselves. I think that is beyond argument. I think society with its civil religion has both the heart and the hope necessary to combat most of the social evils of our time. I think the church therefore wastes energy and time in arguing about its own necessity to the world in this respect. However, that does demand that I say two things about the church and Christian social action. It was a point well taken when a member of this congregation said to me only last week, "I think too often you are saying the right thing. I agree with your doctrinal position, but you're saying the right thing to the wrong congregation at the wrong time." What he meant was that in my caution against our substituting social activism for genuine faith, I have become blind to the fact that this congregation may be all too comfortable about the social ills of our time and is not assaulting those ills with the vigor that it should. That's a point well taken. The fact that the world about us does not need us to tell it what to do with regard to social unrighteousness never forgives the church or excuses the church for its failure to do its own job in that kind of context. That would be like saying "Well, the priest and the Levite do not have to pick the victim out of the ditch because the Samaritan is going to do it." Not at all. We, the church, must always be working as hard and as imaginatively and as unceasingly at social injustice as anybody else in the society.

And I should also say in this context of civil religion that, unless I miss my guess, the time will come probably, perhaps I should say

inevitably the time is coming, because it has happened before, when the social architects of the world, without recourse to the church, will become so embittered and frustrated and despairing, because of the fruitlessness of their efforts, that they will lose heart and hope for the task. It will then be the responsibility of the church, as it has been in the times past, to inspirit the world with a new hope for social righteousness and justice. Even at such times, the church may be reduced to that bottom line which is not at all bad — that is, that one must love one's neighbor as oneself because that is the divine imperative, because God has said it must be so. In the last analysis, justice and equity in the world are probably more dependent upon obedience than upon will or humanitarian sensitivity.

Having said this much, the fact still remains that the church cannot argue the case for its existence and its pertinence in the world today as that which sensitizes and prompts others to engage in the crusades for social, economic, and political justice.

So the question remains. Why join the church? I warn you that the answer I am going to give you is not simple. It is difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to swallow. It may pass you by, not because you are not intelligent enough to understand it, but because I'm not intelligent enough and articulate enough to give it full expression. Of one thing we may be sure: the reason I propose for joining the church is not puny or trivial. The reason I propose for joining the church in today's world is that the church is the only institution and community equipped by God's mercy and grace to experience the supernatural and the transcendent — that is, to experience God — and to interpret and translate that experience in such a way as to give the word of God to the world. It is the only institution I know which comes out of a smoke-filled room with winged creatures flying here and there and saying to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts." It is the only institution that I know which, in that kind of experience, winds up with a word from God to the world which the world cannot possibly misunderstand.

Let me deal first of all with the renewed interest in the supernatural or the transcendent. That's a mixed blessing. On the negative side of the ledger, of course, is the kind of renewed interest that takes on the form of fascination with the occult reflected by the

modern cinema, in which demon-possessed persons, usually young girls, evil-eye the whole family and the community about them to their own destruction. But that is a fascination with the supernatural which ontologically, on the basis of its being, on the basis of its appearance, gives reason to suggest the reality of the transcendent.

A more formidable matter, but I think not yet what we look for, is the attempt of serious-minded scholars and others to establish the fact of the supernatural. Peter Berger, that distinguished sociologist with some religious orientation, wrote a book called *A Rumor of Angels*. The essence of that book was, as he argued from play and humor and a sense of damnation — as he argued from these appearances — that these manifestations in our history constituted a rumor of angels. Berger was saying, in a sense, when he wrote that book, that if you will look for the signs and for the rumors, you may encounter the transcendent. Yet Berger, although claiming to be a Christian, is a Christian outside the church, which I think is nigh unto impossible. He talks about a Christian who discovers Christ in God's love and presence in the anguish of human experience, but he does not want to identify the Christ, the redeeming presence of God in the world, with Jesus of Nazareth — with Jesus whose body as the Christ, the risen Christ, is the church. It is a formidable argument; it is a good and well-written book; but when you get through reading it, you get the impression that what Berger really is trying to do is to say "Well, there is some transcendence about us," and with that Christmas word somewhat changed, "Yes, Virginia, there is a supernatural."

There is another negative aspect of the church and the supernatural which constitutes, I think, a heresy within the church: that is the present trend, growing all the more popular, to identify the human spirit with the Holy Spirit so as to make them almost indistinguishable, one not distinct from the other. Whenever this happens one gets the sense that one has encompassed within one's own spirit the transcendent and the supernatural. God and his Spirit become terribly small. I think I agree with E. J. Tinsley that the true mystics of all the ages always raised a caution against making too much of their experiences — always said that experiences are not to be clung to or induced as if these spiritual experiences are the ultimate in the religious pilgrimage.

Let me repeat, therefore, as over against these kinds of negative experiences of the supernatural, that the church of God's mercy is the only community and institution equipped — prepared to move from an experience with the supernatural and the transcendent into the declaration of the word of God to the people. That happens, if the scriptures are to be trusted, almost without exception, within the context, and never outside the context, of the Judeo-Christian history and tradition. That is the church's fundamental distinction.

In the year that King Uzziah died, there was Isaiah in the temple with all those winged creatures flying around, all that place filled with smoke, voices coming out of the mist: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory." What happened to Isaiah? Repentance and confession. Not being stupefied or stunned with the vision of the supernatural, but rather repentance and confession: "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Upon that kind of confession and repentance there came healing, and then the voice of the Lord said, "Whom shall we send? Who will go for us?" Isaiah said, "Here I am; send me." From the loftiest, most esoteric of experiences, it reduces to where Isaiah says "I'm ready to go. Tell me what to say." And the Lord tells him what to say. Moses was not transfixed at that burning bush, a bush that burned but was not consumed. Out of that experience, Moses strode into Egypt and said those words which still ring as a slogan for freedom in our own time: "Let my people go."

This finds its culmination, of course, in John 1: In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God; the Word was God. There was not anything made without that Word. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. The Word came to his own people and his own people received him not. But to everyone who received that Word, those were given power to become the children of God. And, Professor Berger, the Word was Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. Berger wants Christ who is a concept, but that was Christ who was Jesus of Nazareth.

The idea that the church can take the supernatural and translate it into the Word never has found in scripture higher expression than in the Ephesian letter. I never read that third chapter of Ephesians without being shocked and startled and excited. I hope you heard it as if for the first time, where Paul, or who writes in his

name, says, "I was given the gospel by the grace of God, that I might know the mystery of God which was hidden from men in former generations. That mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs of God's grace." Then he goes on to say, "I was given this gospel to reveal the mystery of God which had been hidden in the ages" — and now hear this — "that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and the powers of the heavenly places." The wisdom of God, for the people of the earth, but not only for the people of the earth — think of it — the wisdom of God through the church is even beamed back to transcendent people, the figures — whatever, I do not know — the figures in the heavenly places. As John McKay said one time, the church was a seminar for angels. I don't know whether you believe that or not; that is not the point. It's still the primary reason for joining the church, that the wisdom of God is made known through the church to the heavenly and the earthly figures. It is that the wisdom of God has been given to the church to be articulated and given word in the world. The implication certainly is that without the church, that wisdom of God is lost in the world.

In that context, let me pick a fight deliberately. You all accuse me of picking more fights than I do, but when I do, I'll confess it. So I deliberately pick a fight with person or persons unknown, one or more, who wrote that statement with regard to the sesquicentennial of Wake Forest University. The statement reads in part that the diversity of the beautiful and noble attributes contained in Western literature may be dissolved into just a few fundamental alternatives. The truly human life requires either piety and obedience or reason and contemplation. One need not reject one or the other, but one must make the choice between the two, as to which is the source of the highest wisdom by which man will achieve his highest purpose.

Even some of the wiser faculty believe that to be a kind of impertinent doggerel. I am not going to treat it like that. I am simply saying that it is written without the benefit of the church. I don't mean to be condescending when I say that it's the best that Athens and the academy can do. It isn't quite cricket — for Athens or the academy or the university or whatever — it isn't quite cricket to say, "Now the truly human life requires either piety and obedi-

ence or reason and contemplation." It isn't quite cricket to mention piety and obedience without mentioning God. Given the human ego, given a choice between reason and contemplation and piety and obedience, as if that's a free-standing choice, anybody is going to choose reason and contemplation. That's the reason they always go to Athens if they're planning their trip without any divine guidance. Piety and obedience make sense only if one who chooses piety and obedience has been already chosen by God and called to, and called upon, and is responding. Now that's the wisdom that the church understands and so many people do not understand. We do not, in a free-standing position, decide to be truly human by piety and obedience. The voice from on high calls to us, as it called to Abraham and on, and then we obey.

I doubt that you will hear that voice outside the church. If you don't want to hear it, don't join the church. If you do want to hear it, you'd better join. Amen.



# Tribulation and Good Cheer

*January 19, 1975*

*Ezekiel 24:15-24; John 16:25-33*

What is going on inside a man, when he gives no evidence of mourning at the death of his beloved wife — the delight of his eyes? That is the way it was with Ezekiel. One night his wife died and the next morning he got up and went about his business as usual.

He was indeed a strange man. The book which bears his name had a hard time getting by early Jewish scholars on its way to the Old Testament canon. There are reports of an ancient Jewish regulation forbidding those under 30 years of age to read the beginning or the end of the book. Some rabbis would not permit the first chapter, because of its unusual and radical imagery, to be read in the synagogues.

Ezekiel's actions, in response to his wife's death, are thought to have been one of the many oracles recorded in his book. This does little to lessen the problem so far as the strangeness of his actions is concerned. By the simplest of definitions, an oracle is "an introductory formula to a divinely inspired message." This means that Ezekiel did what he did because God was using him to bring a prophetic message to the people. So the prophet acted out the word of God in a dramatic symbol. The word first came to Ezekiel:

Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep nor shall your tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of mourners.

The story continues with one of the most poignant lines of scripture; that is, Ezekiel's terse account of his obedience: ". . . and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded."

" . . . and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded." That does bear repeating!

And doing as he was commanded was to get up and go about his business as usual on the morning after his wife had died. Carry on, Ezekiel! Intercept the flood of tears spewing from your heartbreak before they reach your eyes. Sigh but not aloud. Make your moaning sound like a growling in the bowels. Do not give in to grief. Let no mourners break bread with you. Put on your hat and shoes and walk about like a man who has things to do and cannot be distracted by bereavement.

No less unusual was the question put by the people when they realized the strangeness of Ezekiel's actions. It went like this: "Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting thus?" Until reading it more carefully, this time around, I had always assumed that the people were mostly upset by Ezekiel and that their questioning was an indirect criticism of his apparent hardhearted response to his loss. This was not at all the case. No criticism may be inferred from the question as it is written. Neither are we to assume that Ezekiel is playing the role of a stoic, a brave and courageous man, taking life as it comes without whimper or plaint.

It is best to trust the perception of the people. Ezekiel was their prophet. They had watched him before. Whatever he was doing in their midst was a potential lesson for them. His oracular action in this case was a mystery to them. They did not understand it. But they gambled that his action was some kind of dramatic symbol. Thus they did not ask "Ezekiel, what is going on? Didn't you love your wife?" And they did not talk among themselves saying "Ezekiel is a brave and a strong man. I wonder how he does it?" No, none of this. The question was "Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting thus?"

What did it mean?

So far as Ezekiel was concerned, it meant that the message of the word of God transcends all other concerns. It meant that the burden of God's message to the world cannot be sloughed off, even when

personal burdens seem to be too much in and of themselves.

Indeed it meant that the prophet, whether he is a professional preacher or a layman, must make use of his suffering so as to declare in stronger terms the redemptive word of God. Suffering is not designed to make him tough, inured to hardships, and stoical in response. It is to make him sensitive, to help him understand the tragedy of others, and to identify him with the burden of others so that no load is unshared, no load is to be handled alone.

The servant of God is not permitted to cry helplessly when a brother or sister is undone with grief and suffering. He cannot be embittered by his own distress so as to resent the joys of others. One whose husband is dead or whose child is wayward must not envy another woman her living and vibrant man, or another mother her sturdy and stalwart child. This was what the word meant to Ezekiel.

And when the people asked what it meant for them, he replied that when Jerusalem fell and when their sons and daughters, left behind as they were carried into exile, perished before the sword, they were not to cry, nor mourn, nor break bread with mourners. That was his direct word to them. But the question why remains.

It is all the more a question since mourning was very much the thing to be done in those days. To refuse to mourn in time of tragedy was improper. Mourning, developed to a professional skill, provided for eulogy, for lamentation and for consolation.

So far as Ezekiel's prophecy was concerned, the plight of the people of God, because of their unrighteousness, was much too sad for tears. He was a prophet of unrelieved doom, it would appear. Nothing was deserving of eulogy. There was no efficacy in lamentation. No consolation was to be expected.

But the doom was not really that complete. For if the people would refrain from mourning, they would know that Yahweh was the Lord God. Do not recoil from that possibility, as if the Lord God were engaging in some egocentric craving for status. Even in times of the greatest tragedies and despair, to know that the Lord is God is to know that the worst to befall us is not outside his control. To say that God is not absent from tragedy is to raise the question of his goodness. But even when evil holds sway, and even when God seems to cause or, at least, to allow it, it is still heartening to know that he has the power to reverse and redeem the situation.

I am never quite willing to assure and convince myself of the goodness of God at the expense of the power of God. That would be to say that because God is good, he is powerless to do anything about the evil which befalls us. The people of Ezekiel's time were being asked to forego absolute assurance of God's goodness in order to be assured of his power. He told them what to do in the face of utter tragedy. He insisted that mourning would be of no avail. And if they acted out that command, they would know that the Lord, he is God. For them and for us, this is the most necessary understanding in times both fair and foul.

I remember standing at the bedside of a young girl dead from reaction to medicines prescribed to cure a throat infection. It was so great a tragedy as to leave her parents and me numb and stricken with wonder and anger. The mother found her small voice as we left the hospital room — enough to say, "It is God's will." I thought her husband would strike her. He was angry at the thought and angry with God at the possibility. He did not — could not believe that God would do this. Theologically, I agreed with the husband. Perhaps I still do. But there is this nagging reminder. That mother is still a lovely and beautiful person. That father is a broken and drunken man. Maybe the response to the daughter's death, different as it was between the two, is not the only reason, or even a reason, for this outcome, but I have not been able to keep from wondering about it across these years.

It may have been that God's ban on mourning had another reason. It could have been an omen of what was to come. Perhaps his silence and apparent unconcern for Ezekiel and the people was because he knew the eventual outcome. Perhaps he is silent and absent from us at the nadir of our lives in order to reduce us to knowing that he is the Lord God. This is ultimate rather than the history of our own personal sorrows. History is meaningful but it is not ultimate.

With the advent of Christianity, strengthening Judaism's resurrection faith, and refining it as well, mourning became less customary. Perhaps God did what he did, so that Jesus might be able to say and be understood later on: "Blessed are those that mourn for they shall be comforted." Maybe only so could we now understand that we are not to be comforted because we mourn or as a result of our mourning. We are to be comforted because the Lord, he is God. And

he can comfort us, when our plight is far too deep and tragic to be eased by our own mourning.

So it was that our Lord, knowing how near the cross had come to be, turned to his disciples and said to them in that upper room: "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." In the midst of inevitable tribulation, he called for hope and courage. That is what he asked for. He was not thinking of laughter. He was not talking about rooting for the home team when he mentioned cheer. It was to have hope and courage in the face of the world's inevitable tribulation.

When tribulation and affliction presses in from every side, squeezing you between its powerful hands, until the heart labors, and veins constrict, and breath is short; when tribulation is so pronounced as to immobilize you; when there is nothing to do for self or for loved ones; when enemies are no longer imaginary but lash around you with power and leer into your face — do not mourn. Take courage. Embrace hope. Know that the Lord, he is God.

The world's worst, and even its best, are not ultimate. It has been overcome. Christ has brought the kingdom nigh and to bear. And here he took the heaviest and cruelest blows of sin, paid its highest price, that of the wages of death, and emerged triumphantly. We die with him so that we live with him. He knew that he had won when he was willing to go to the cross. The outcome of the game was not in doubt but he had to play to the end. So must you. So must I. Mourning — no! Caring — yes! Sigh but not aloud. Get up, lest you drown in your tears. Put on your hat and shoes and walk about. Be of good cheer. The world has been overcome.



# Self-Denial and Christian Service

March 11, 1985

*Psalm 84; Mark 8:34-9:1*

There is more to be feared from those who administer love than from those who administer justice. Although this may be contrary to our usual way of thinking, it is not simply a wrong way of thinking with which we ought to be concerned; the shape of individual lives and of society as well is determined primarily by the molding forces of justice and love. In this respect, love has a potential for being more destructive than justice, rather than the other way around.

One of the reasons for this reality is that justice has checks and balances and cannot be defined or practiced without referring to the definition and practice of love. By definition and practice, justice entails an element of mutual concern or mutual love. Justice is seldom, probably never, simply a matter of power. As a general rule, those who are treated unjustly are not powerful enough to redress the wrongs committed against them. Theirs is a hopeless cause unless and until a more powerful advocate undertakes their cause. And this will not come to pass unless the one who is powerful enough to bring justice to bear has some regard and concern for the victim of injustice.

On the other hand, love does not require justice in the same manner or to the same degree. When justice is the agenda, concern and love for the victim of injustice is required. In this circumstance, the unjust is not being loved, at least for whatever time as required to bring justice to pass. Love begins without regard for justice. If it is the kind of love which is beckoned by attractiveness, of whatever

kind, matters of justice are not under consideration. If it is what qualifies as Christian love, love which is determined not by its object but by the one who decides to love, then such love is arbitrary, even capricious in the best sense of the word, and is therefore not appreciably informed or influenced by a sense of justice.

It is in this way that I claim that those who administer love are more to be feared than those who administer justice. By its very nature, justice is subject to checks and balances of whatever community in which it is applied. In other words, justice is the product of a social mind in terms both of definition and application. It is impossible for an individual to decide by arbitrary means what is just.

Love is not a product of a social mind. An individual may love what is attractive, what seems to be beneficial to the person, or by a decision of the will. In any such case, the wider community has little influence upon the decision that one makes to love another.

It may therefore be generally assumed that justice, rather than love, is the best recourse for dealing with social problems, or perhaps a safer assumption is that justice is the best place to start when attacking such problems. But it must always be remembered that our obligation is not one of realizing perfect justice, because this is an impossible goal. We are obligated therefore only to seek the realization of approximate justice, the degree of which will be determined by the contextual possibilities.

The problem of peace and the problem of hunger provide good examples for recognizing the complexities of applying justice. The quest for peace has split into two parts, one on each side of the work of the United Nations. There are those who argue for nuclear arms and strong national defenses as a deterrent to war because such weapons make war unthinkable. One element of this argument, overlooked by Russia and the United States, is that a balance of power is necessary if arms are to be a deterrent. Therefore, each country even as it seeks to persuade the other to disarm must guard against inequities. In other words, the United States must take care lest Russia were to become so weak that our own nation might be tempted to start a war. All assumptions that this nation would forever be incapable of doing such a thing can be embraced only by forgetting what we did in Grenada.

The argument for nuclear disarmament, particularly a unilateral

one, is born of naivete. And it is carried to its most absurd extreme when we suggest that even if this were to mean the defeat and destruction of our own country, we should love peace to such a degree as to be willing to sacrifice our land.

The real question in all of this is, what has happened to the grand scheme of the United Nations? A fundamental reason for the UN's failure to bring the world any closer to peace is that it has no workable program for establishing justice. It is a tribute to modern men and women that they are able to subject their own selfish interests to the pursuit of justice within a wider community. This has proven to be impossible for the UN because it has never become a community. This failure means that justice has not been produced by a social mind because the UN has been little more than a place of competition for the selfish concerns of its participating nations.

Furthermore, whatever concern a sense of justice has spawned for the underdeveloped and underprivileged nations of the Third World has been generally aborted because these nations have shown a remarkable capacity for "biting the hand that feeds them." In short, the love which started from a vantage of justice has dissipated because of the abrasive demands by the nations of the Third World for a justice far beyond their deserving.

This complication may be seen more clearly in respect to the plight of the hungry. If justice is to be served, no human being should suffer starvation or hunger in the world. In this case, a doctrine of human rights is to be understood as contending that one should not starve, simply because one is human. In this way justice therefore ushers in concern for the hungry, and thus a form of love is brought to pass. But if and when ultimate justice is served, the human rights of the individual may be outweighed by other considerations of justice. Is this person hungry because of shiftlessness or sloth? Is it right to give money to a hungry family when the father will most certainly use the money for alcohol, leaving the mother and children no less hungry than had the money not been supplied? And is it not true that the attempt to alleviate the hunger of a nation of people is often brought to naught because of the corruption of the leaders of those people? The dictum may be that the justice which brings love to bear upon almost any kind of social problem will eventually negate that love if and when a perfect justice is pursued without compromise.

All of this is to say that extreme justice benefits the deserving and the righteous. It disallows compassion and grace. It will not tolerate love for those whose human or civil rights have been forfeited by virtue of their sins of commission and omission. By definition and practice, justice must be on the side of the right rather than the wrong.

The only alternative to such brutal justice when carried to its extreme is one of mercy, grace, or love. The danger here is one of oversimplification. Mutual love, which is based on the reciprocity of give and take, and which is compatible with the pursuit of justice, will not suffice when the brutal consequences of extreme justice threaten to take their toll. Sacrificial love, which is arbitrary and thus without apparently logical motive, is the more effective answer. But although sacrificial love is invariably arbitrary, arbitrary love is not at the same time and by the same token necessarily or invariably sacrificial. Or better said, in the complex world of human and national relations, the lover may not make as great a sacrifice as others who are dragged into the sacrificial act. For example, a Christian pacifist, with one's insistence that one's actions should always conform to agape, selfless and sacrificial love, has no right to put one's nation into jeopardy by waging a peace which may mean not only the loss of the life of the pacifist but the destruction of the nation. The kingdom of God is the only kingdom which builds on sacrificial love. Loving a dangerous criminal in such a way as to prevent justice being demanded of that person would be permissible so long as only one's own life were endangered by such an act of mercy, but is impermissible if it means that the lives of others would also be imperiled. The gesture of the Pope in forgiving the man who tried to kill him was a merciful and permissible deed so long as the criminal remained in prison. Had the Pope insisted that his forgiveness be extended to the point of releasing the potential "hit man" from prison, this would have put a hired gun back into society and would not have been permissible because the Pope would have made others potential victims of that act.

The point of plowing through these complicated relationships of love and justice is one of contending that men and women who give themselves to carving out programs for the solution of all social problems should limit themselves to administering justice

and mutual love because these two qualities commend and support one another. What threatens the order and tranquility of our world is when men and women bring sacrificial love into situations by their own judgments and as they see fit. And this is done mostly by Christians who wrongly assume that all that is needed is an understanding of the meaning of Christian love, which they are then free to apply willy-nilly to the problems of our society. Often in turning the other cheek, it is the second cheeks of others which are more likely to be slapped. Even the most ruthless tyrant is quite eager to forego slapping the other cheek of the romantic agapeist who offers it if this releases the tyrant to slap the other cheek of those who have not offered such a sacrifice. Far too many Christians have made the mistake of believing that sacrificial love may be applied regardless of the circumstance, that it may be applied as an ethic detached from God and Christ by any one who so decides, and that such a strategy, the strategy of the cross, no less, is guaranteed of success. The world may be better served by good people making no pretense of Christianity than by those who believe that they have graduated from the Church with a degree in Christian love.

The truth of the matter is that only those who follow Jesus to the cross are capable of using the strategy of the cross. The truth of the matter is that no one can take someone else to the cross; that is not sacrificial love. The truth of the matter is that agape, sacrificial love, can never be bequeathed to any person thereafter to be a part of that person's character. The truth of the matter is that agape, or Christian love, cannot be practiced apart from the sacrifice of Christ. Our sacrifice is not sufficient to save the world. The world's redemption depends upon God's love and the sacrifice of Christ. We may be sacrificed with him but we cannot be sacrificed in his place. The fact is that sacrificial love is the love of God given to us and then through us to the world. We are incapable of agape unless we love with the love which God and Christ supply, unless we love as he has loved us.

Christian action therefore begins with worship. We do not, as is worded on far too many church bulletins, "enter to worship and depart to serve." Service is worship. And if service is worship, it is put in proper perspective. Too many of us who are known as Christians want to use the church as some sort of pastoral pep rally from which we emerge full of love with which to supply a world

which neither wants it nor can make any good use of it. And we see ourselves as the architects of a pure society drawn upon the inspiration of agape, which we believe to be an unencumbered possession of our own spirit.

But such love is safe and safely applied only by those who would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of wickedness, and one might add, by those who would rather be doorkeepers in places of worship than the bright and energetic do-gooders who believe themselves to be the new messiahs. But this desire to be doorkeeper is not self-effacement, is not self-disparagement. The psalmist was speaking of priority, not self-hate. He would do anything — preferred to do anything for the sake of being counted among the faithful than to be enthroned among the unfaithful. And such doorkeepers make better servants in the world than those who believe they are beyond the need for worship and are now expected only to serve.

When Jesus Christ said if one was to follow him he should deny himself, take up his cross and follow him, he was not asking for self-flagellation, disparagement, or even some form of Christian poverty. Self-denial in this context means dispossession, disowning oneself, disinheriting oneself. The context says as much — if you try to save your life you will lose it.

# The End of Parochialism and the Church-Related College

August 22, 1971

*Preschool Workshop, Mars Hill College*

We are living in the last days of the parochial venture in modern history. That fact that it is now practically obscured by twilight's shadow does not in any way indicate that parochialism was a mistake from the beginning. It has enjoyed a successful and noble history. Institutions of higher learning in early America were mostly under the aegis of the church. ". . . only the church had sufficient vitality and sufficient stability to undertake" that kind of effort. In a more general sense, it is safe to say that this nation would never have become the enlightened and humane land that it is without the parochial ventures of education, healing, and charity. Had the churches failed to enlarge their parishes so as to include these initial ministries, we would now be living in a comparatively impoverished and savage country.

This paper is concerned but with one phase of parochial history; namely, that of higher education. I boast of no special competence in this category. I do qualify so far as experienced observation is of any significance. I served a parish adjacent to the campus of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, for a span of eighteen years. I am beginning my eighth year as the minister of the Wake Forest Baptist Church, which is located on the campus of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Out of that perspective comes the present conviction that the parochial venture in higher education is no longer indicated and may no longer serve as a fruitful endeavor. What this portends for a college such as

Mars Hill in general and to its faculty and administration in particular is the essence of my remarks.

Let me say immediately that it does not mean the elimination of the *raison d'etre* for church-related colleges. It does not mean yet another endeavor forfeited by the church under an onus of failure. And it does not mean an even greater identity crisis for the administration and faculty serving such institutions. Quite to the contrary, the future is promising if we can clearly recognize and adjust to the end of parochialism and conduct our work in the light of that recognition and adjustment.

The barest definition of *parochial* will serve the ends of this paper. Webster's dictionary has it like this: "*parochial* — 1: of or relating to a church parish, 2: confined or restricted as if within the borders of a parish."

Obviously the second definition is more germane to the subject at hand. Like Wake Forest and others, Mars Hill College has been a confined and restricted institution "as if [it were] within the borders of a parish." Like all other respectable academic bodies, Mars Hill has chafed with increasing irritation under the itchy rash of such restriction and confinement. The more it has come to pursue truth under the spur of relentless excitement, the more it has realized the indispensability of free inquiry in academe, the more it has failed to recruit choice faculty members because of religious prejudice; and the more it has witnessed the disparity between ecclesiastical control and financial support by and from the churches, the more has the rash and itching increased. This increased restlessness and rebellion on the part of Mars Hill and her counterparts across the state and nation — both Baptist and otherwise — is an unmistakably convincing sign of the end of the parochial era in higher education.

It is not the most significant sign. That is to be found in the currently small, but nonetheless inevitable, realization by the churches that their parochial endeavors are now operating under the law of diminishing returns. On the present stage, parochialism is self-defeating. To put it bluntly, Mars Hill has not and cannot keep the faith.

Let me explain in this way. Despite the recent popularity of modern secularist champions the likes of Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Robinson, and Cox — along with the "death of God" entrepreneurs —

the church has actually been secularizing its word just as long as it has practiced parochialism. It was in the secular business from the time that it sought to extend the horizons of its parish through related institutions, such as those of higher learning. This was its pilgrimage, for the sake of relevance, into a secular world that demanded the materialization of the gospel into tangible and pertinent forms. You will see at once that I detect little difference between the phenomenon of secularizing the church and sacralizing the world. Obviously, the secularizing efforts of the church were designed to enlarge the sacred dimensions of the world.

At the very least, this was the intent and purpose of secularization under the parochial umbrella. With the enlargement of its mission, the church worked to extend its influence and its authority in like proportion. Its parochial institutions not only were shaped to make the gospel available in more immediate and practical forms to the whole of society, they were designed to promote and keep the faith which the church espoused. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church has been more open in this avowed purpose than its Protestant counterparts does not mean that there has never been a strong Protestant parochial movement in this country. Its difference in zeal has been far less than its difference in conspicuously.

By way of example, I still remember my astonishment at the arguments of some of my colleagues as they addressed the dancing controversy at Wake Forest in the late 1950s. A number of these colleagues were so steeped in the sectarian tradition as to disallow any suggestion that places of worship should be called the *sanctuary* in the churches. *Auditorium* was the only word allowed because *sanctuary* has the connotation of a "holy place." But during the heated concourse of that debate, I heard them argue that dancing should not be allowed on the campus of Wake Forest College because that was holy ground. This is parochialism with its delicate extremities hanging out. The religious edifice itself has no "holy place" but the Christian college occupies "holy ground."

However holy Wake Forest may have been in those days, you now have my word that it is holy no longer. Nor have I breathed any of that famed Christian atmosphere during my seven-year stint. Surely, if it were floating around, seven years is long enough to get a whiff of it at least. But the secularist has greater lung power.

He breathes harder. Like Mars Hill, Wake Forest has not kept the faith because it could not. What is more, Mars Hill and Wake Forest have not kept the faith because they *should not*. It never really was, and it certainly is not now, the business of any college to forgo education for the sake of indoctrination. The college found this out long before the church. Now that the church is stumbling upon this somewhat painful realization, parochial higher education cannot be sustained.

One of the reasons that the churches are losing their zeal for parochial education at the college level is because the endeavor is proving to be nonproductive. So far as the anticipated results from parochialism are concerned, they can spend their money more effectively in other media. "No purpose is more difficult to achieve," writes Myron F. Wick in his *The Church-Related College*, "than the development of a community ethos in which intellectual adventure is possible in an atmosphere of moral concern and commitment. Studies which have attempted to measure the changing value structures of college students show no evidence that church-related colleges are any more effective generally on this point than other types of institution." This is to say that if and when intellectual adventure is taken seriously, it so occupies the time and energy of the church-related college as to make it as inept at encouraging moral concern and commitment with any more success than its secular counterparts, private or state supported. In other and painful words, students are no more moral and dedicated as the result of being in church-related colleges than would be the case with other institutions of higher learning. Parochialism does not any longer pay off in higher education.

In another category, churches are discovering that parochialism is even counterproductive. If they insist on making parochialism pay off, they sustain anti-intellectual communities which are hostile to the educational purposes and justifications of the colleges. I confess to being dogmatic at this point. There are those who will argue that the highest intellectual achievements are highly possible in parochialistic colleges. Such arguments will not wash. Wherever the processes of free inquiry are restrained, as they always are under parochialism, the intellectual venture is vitiated.

That the churches are beginning to admit to this fact is best illustrated by the Reverend Mr. Oral Roberts, founder and presi-

dent of Oral Roberts University. When this institution was founded it promised to be the Bob Jones of the Midwest. It was to keep the faith in the very laboratory of the acids of intellectualism. During the summer, however, Mr. Roberts shared with his television audience the greatest single event that had occurred at the university since its founding. Was it that a campuswide revival had taken place? Had 75 percent of the student body committed itself to "full-time Christian service," whatever that is? Had Oral Roberts University been baptized by the Holy Spirit? Had the Ford Foundation given a grant to the university to establish a medical school completely staffed with "faith-healers"? The answer was no on every count. The great event was the accreditation of the university. And as you well know, most accrediting agencies are not comprised of angels but of very secularly minded men. When Oral Roberts decided that accreditation is the greatest thing that could have ever possibly happened to his institution, secularism has triumphed and parochialism is dead. We should have known that this would happen when he became a Methodist.

Yet another factor impinges upon this scene. As the church sought to use higher education in its parochial sweep across the land, it allowed its parochial arm to change from gestures of proclamation to gestures of problem solving. In other words it succumbed to the demands of the practical and relevant. No longer was man's maladjustment and misalignment due to alienation from God. His troubles stemmed from disarrayed emotions and a mind that was not reaching its mature potential. But as the church-related college began to approach individual and social problems on this level, it was immediately apparent that secular schools could do these jobs as well, if not better. And by all odds, they could do it cheaper. This is but another way of saying that the main responsibility of the church is proclamation and celebration, not problem solving.

An advertisement for a particular brand of liquor has shown more imagination than the pulpit on this count. Of this liquor it reads: "It is not for solving problems / It is for celebrating solutions." The idea so excited me that I was tempted to go and buy a fifth. But then I decided to see if the church might once again adopt some such style.

The end of the parochial era will not leave the church unaffected. As I see it, for the time being it must seek to rediscover and to

reestablish the distinctive spheres of the sacred and the profane. In the drawing of such boundaries, the church-related college will not be within the circle of the sacred. In a culture that is satiated with secularism, largely the result of the church's attempt to sacralize the world, the church must learn to be itself.

New techniques of engaging the world at its junctures of need and of ethically confronting it at its junctures of rebellion will have to be devised. Such techniques will no longer feature a middleman — the parochial arm with which to serve and judge and influence culture.

The temptation to proceed with what will be demanded of the church in this new circumstance is almost overwhelming. But for the purpose of this paper we must not yield to temptation. However, it will be good for its colleges and universities if it recognizes and affirms the sage advice of Peter Berger:

One may begin by admiring Christians for their political involvement. But then one must admire all the others, including the Black Muslims and the atheists who share these involvements. If the political struggles have become the very reason for being a Christian in the first place, this reason will lose plausibility the more one involves oneself in these struggles. If secular aims define the mission of the church in society, the conclusion that the church is unnecessary is inevitable, no matter how noble these secular aims may be.

In a confessional mood, perhaps we should allow for the possibility that the secularist parochial venture of the church in most areas, as well as higher education, was motivated by Charlie Brown's sidekick, the security-blanketed Linus. In contemplating his calling, Linus confides to Charlie Brown: "If I ever get to be a theologian I am going to be what they call a theologian in the marketplace."

"So you can reach the people?" Charlie asks.

"No, that's where the lettuce is."

I have suggested from the outset that this did not mean the end of the church-related or Christian college. I have every hope that the end of parochialism will allow us to have a "Christian college" in a new and much more acceptable way. I must define my term here. Borrowing from the late Alexander Miller, I am using the term

"Christian" not as it refers "to some measure of moral or spiritual achievement, but to visible identification, normally by the sign of Baptism, with a visible Community." This is what the term "Christian" meant in its original setting. All baptized persons were Christians no matter how good or bad they might have been. "By analogy this would mean that when we ask about the Christianity of a college, we are not undertaking the impossible chore of assessing its morality or spirituality: we are asking simply if it is 'baptized' — that is, if it is visibly and formally related to the church."

Although Mars Hill College will in all probability no longer be the parochial stepchild of the church in the foreseeable future, this does not mean that it can no longer be a church-related or Christian college. In other words it can be that and have some very raunchy students and some very atheistic professors. The transition that I am predicting is more one of mood and style than of the fundamentals of the relationship. Thus the question before us centers on the nature of a nonparochial Christian college.

At the outset I want to modify slightly Orville W. Wake's definition of the Christian college. In an article called "The Emerging Image of the Church College" in the periodical *Encounter*, this church college president wrote: "The college is principally a setting which the church makes possible in order that the processes of scholarship, of learning, of inquiry can confront and be confronted by the demands of Christian faith or the ultimate aspirations of Christians." In the place of the church's making this possible, I would suggest an emendation which prompts the church to encourage this kind of setting by entering into contract with the college willing to create and maintain that kind of scene.

This would mean that the church would buy the services of educational institutions willing and eager to allow the intellectual venture to be confronted by the word of the church and by its style of life.

Once this kind of contractual agreement is settled and the church is willing to pay a part of the cost, two assumptions ought to be made. Once again I quote from Miller:

When the church for whatever reasons, historical or other, accepts responsibility for some part of the work of higher education, *its first obligation is to the work itself*. . . . The church

loses all right to hold the work of higher education under its aegis if it does any violence to the conditions of true education for any reason whatever, even a "Christian" reason.

Surely, the church cannot justify its association with higher education if it would use and distort it merely for its own purposes. Its purported sense of mission and its concern for its own integrity militate against that. The fact that neither mission nor integrity have persuaded the church to abstain from such unchristian exploitation is a sorry chapter in its history. So the first obligation of the church in higher education is to the work of higher education.

This assumption ought to be coupled with another one. The church may rightfully assume that the Christian college and its functions "will confront and be confronted by the demands of Christian faith or the ultimate aspirations of Christians." In addition to tangible services purchased outright by the church from the college, the church-related institution is obligated to provide a setting in which the church may engage in dialogue with what is not church. In a very real sense, it is not the responsibility of the Christian college to bring the Christian and non-Christian dialogue to a proper decision. It is the responsibility of the college to discourage any decision so that the dialogue continues.

However, the history of the debate between militant Christianity and militant atheism reveals that the Christian is somewhat less likely to use his authority to suppress the atheist than vice versa. I have not heard of many Christian professors, on nonchurch faculties, trying to suppress the secular tones of that institution. At most, such persons do no more than request an even break for the faith. Although I am not for prayer in the public schools, this present movement to that end is simply that and nothing more. On the other hand, I have witnessed the surprising antics of many unbelieving professors on Christian campuses, who not only insist on their freedom to give evidence of their unbelief but who contend that the college even in its ceremonial and social styles must obliterate the Christian image. That would indeed mean the end of dialogue.

I am therefore committed to the principle that the Christian college, formally related to and supported by the church, should use key administrative positions for assuring that the relationship

will continue in ways both free and honorable. The presidents, provosts, deans, and to some extent, departmental chairmen should assume some such responsibility. Although a Christian college need not require its faculty members to sign abstracts of orthodoxy in order to be Christian, neither should it employ a faculty member so that he can be the professional atheist on campus by virtue of his unbelief.

Let me set some brief remarks about the faculty, in this entire context, in the light of what I understand to be some of your educational innovations. As I understand you are moving in the direction of more flexible curricula and are seeking to engage the student as a person in his own right.

The humanist on the faculty will have no problem with this approach. He always puts persons above things and cherishes man beyond all other values. He is an excellent educator so far as motives are concerned. His belief that man is at once the universal question and answer makes the education of man of supreme importance. Since he and the student have only one another, we may be sure that he will give his very best to that student in the total relationship. I cannot refrain from saying, because I am a Christian, that the fundamental flaw in any person, either self-made or fashioned by another human, is that he is the product of unskilled labor.

I would rather predict that the Christian professor will have more difficulty with person-centered education than his humanistic colleague. His concern for the will of God, his link with traditional faith, his commitment to the family of God will not allow him to put himself or any other person in the position of singular glory. He agrees with the humanist that man is the universal question. He vigorously disagrees that man is the universal answer.

His approach to the student will be that of the evangelist. Does that boggle your mind loose from its moorings? Before your shudder at this concept separates you from your dentures, let me elaborate. For one thing, this is not a devious means for disguising the return of parochialism to the Christian campus. Evangelism, in its truest sense, cannot operate under the aegis of parochialism. Its elimination frees the Christian professor to relate to the student in the name of Christ without being suspect of trying to put more muscle in the parochial biceps. He evangelizes the student by

proclaiming the good news that he cannot and need not be his own salvation. In distinction from the humanist, he contends that the education of the student is not the *summum bonum* of life although it is the chief end of the work of the college. He seeks to educate the student so that the latter will become a chief actor in dramatizing the redemptive love of God for all men on the stage of history. In a word, he puts education in its proper perspective, "designed . . . to honor God with the best service of our minds, and to put the Christian case to the godly hazard of free discussion."

As to his relationship with his humanistic colleagues, I have this to say. One of my good friends in the department of philosophy is a fine humanist and an honest atheist. From time to time we tackle each other in a heated but friendly discussion. Not too long ago, he scored rather heavily in one of our debates. He knew, others knew, and I knew that he had logically reduced my argument and me to shambles. Then, with his customary gentleness, he observed: "I guess you will have to give up on me. Your arguments simply give me no good reason for believing in God or for being a Christian." In reply, I admitted that he had won his case in logic, but then I went on to say: "No, I will not give up on you. I must now intercede for you, which means that I am putting you at the top of my prayer list."

# He Died. So What?

March 18, 1984

*Mark 10:32-44; I Corinthians 1:10-25*

Jesus Christ took less pains to describe his own vocation than that of his disciples. He talked more about what they should do than about what he was doing. There is no evidence that Jesus was secretive or furtive concerning his work. That he thought it to be insignificant is out of the question, in light of the information that we have. Perhaps the most logical explanation for Jesus's apparent reluctance to define his vocation occurs in the Fourth Gospel on the occasion when Jesus stubbornly persisted in washing his disciples' feet. He said to Peter, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand." This one sentence commentary may hold the clue to Christ's relatively noncommittal posture concerning his mission in whole.

His usual reticence in elaboration of precise detail was never more pronounced than when he was talking about his impending death. It is more than passing strange, is it not, that he said little to his disciples about his forthcoming death, leaving them without much recourse from which to reflect on its purpose, meaning, and effect. My first reaction is to wish that he had said much more about his death so that we who live on this back side of the event might refer to original sources for our understanding. On second thought, however, the death of Christ for us is left in a more dynamic posture because he has presented it to us in such a way as to demand an active and enduring faith concerning its purpose, meaning, and effect.

Although his references were scant, we would ponder what Jesus did have to say about his death. Almost without exception such remarks, even if not to be considered as secondary, were made

somewhat obliquely, prompted, as they were, by answers to questions raised about his crucifixion.

The last sentence of the text from Mark reads, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus said this to the disciples after James and John had requested reservations to sit at his left and right hand when he came into his glory. The emphasis here seems to have been as much upon living as a servant as upon dying as a servant.

In John 12:32 Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself." The disconcerting note in this regard is that he did not, and has not, drawn the world unto himself by his death. Did John know this already, or when he explained that Jesus "said this to show by what death he was to die," did he think that such explanation was the main purpose of Christ's remark? Such interpretation is supported by the fact that John also reported that Jesus spoke of being lifted up from the earth, a Roman form of execution appropriated from the Phoenicians and Persians, as a prediction that he would not be crucified by the Jews, for whom such execution was unlawful.

Let us turn, in the third instance, to his words at the Last Supper. "This is my body." The Gospels leave it with that. It remained for Paul to add the words "which is for you" or "which is broken for you." Although his death was certain by the time of the supper, Jesus's explanation was quite brief. The cup was given the greater emphasis, more than body: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

All the more remarkable is that Jesus did not ever speak of his cross. He did not mention by word this great symbol of our faith. Christ employed the metaphor only with reference to his disciples. They were told to bear their own crosses in two situations. Matthew 10 and Luke 14 employ the metaphor as descriptive of the probable necessity of separating from one's family in order to follow Jesus. Matthew 16 and Mark 8 speak of bearing one's cross as one follows Jesus to his death, but not necessarily the death of the one who follows. Following is cross bearing in both cases.

When Jesus announced to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die, this was all that he had to say. Mark, who liked secrets and never used any more words than he thought he had to, does not even introduce the element of necessity

into the impending crucifixion. As Jesus and the disciples were on the road to Jerusalem, he said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles, and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him . . ." In and of themselves the words add up to a death as senseless as it was terrible.

Matthew softened the story a bit with his explanation that Jesus was under necessity, divine necessity being assumed, to go to Jerusalem. Jesus himself said as much, according to the record, but that was the extent of the announcement of the death which there awaited him. He told his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem, which was the only reason that he gave.

In the scripture, therefore, the architect of the doctrine of the cross and of most of all which that means was the great missionary to the Gentiles, Paul the apostle. With one exception, that of the Letter to the Hebrews, the writings of Paul contain the sum total of what is said about the cross in the New Testament. At times in rich metaphors and again in words economically direct, Paul weaves into the fabric of his theology the thread of the doctrine of crucifixion and atonement, a thread without which his faith and dogma, and ours as well, would come apart at the seams.

Of some such texture are the words of his letter to Corinth:

Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

"Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" stands out in the letter to the Galatians. And in Ephesians:

He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments, and ordinances, that he might

create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.

And in Philippians:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Finally, in Colossians:

And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Although the exegetes caution against placing too much stress on "uncircumcision of your flesh" as designating that Paul's audience was primarily Gentile, I dare to say that such a possibility cannot be summarily rejected. This final passage does indeed send out a signal primarily to the Gentile world. Although we may not know all of the reasons that the Greek church concentrated on the birth of Christ more than his death, we do know that history records the fact that the cross was adopted as the central symbol of the faith in the religious West. The Roman Catholics were the first to appropriate this symbol, with their sign of the crucifix. Protestants removed the figure of the dying Christ, emptying the cross because of their commitment to an empty tomb as well.

I have told you this much in order to burden you with the challenge that the *so what?* of the cross of our Savior is up to us, to you and to me. It is not up to us to make it real, to give it meaning. Nor does its effect rely upon us alone. It is up to us, however, to recognize and appropriate its meaning, helped immeasurably by the mind and work of Paul, and to search out its effect in our own lives and those about us. It is up to us to avail ourselves of the love and power of Christ which makes for our salvation and that of the

world, and although we cannot supply the power of the cross, we can proclaim Christ crucified and risen as the hope of the world.

What here we are called upon to do is to give meaning to the miracle, interpreting the sign implicit in the cross. Thus, we are under obligation to respond to a most difficult task, to interpret the sign on which we are most dependent. Through the years the church has battled constantly with the temptation to interpret the cross in such a way as to make it more manageable for the human mind. Among such attempts is what is called the "moral influence theory" concerning the cross. This interpretation suggests that the main force of the cross is its influence upon the faithful, as well as others, to live sacrificial lives. When noble men and women die for a cause greater than themselves or their own, there is a tendency to think of such deaths as the death of the cross. This is not so. When we die for others, we die as martyrs rather than as saviors. And what is missing from such martyrdom is power and wisdom rather than love. Paul may have wanted to make some such distinction when, in the Corinthian letter, he wrote of God's power and wisdom concerning the cross rather than of love.

If the cross is held dear by us, we should be sympathizing with the Christians of Poland today, whose churches are being stripped of the cross by the government. The meaning of the cross to the Catholic Church is not to be denied, and, therefore, the removal of the crosses from their churches is a tragic matter. But we must take care lest we go to the opposite extreme, to use the form of the cross for everything under the sun except the truth that it should signify.

The time may not be far away when America will have civilized and politicized almost every one of its religious symbols. Although constant vigilance is appropriate in defense of the principle of the separation of church and state, I do not believe that our most immediate danger is the loss of the principle of separation. For example, we have no reason to suspect that some kind of state church is in the offing. Our danger is one of a different kind of secularism. Instead of the establishment of a favored church, our government is now tending to incorporate the mission of the church under its own banner, so as to make the church unnecessary. This is what is going on in the drive to put prayer in the schools. It is certainly what is going on when the Supreme Court, accurately I believe, ruled that a crèche could be placed at the expense of the

public in the Christmas display of a New England town because the nativity scene has no religious meaning or significance in such instances. I do not agree with the ruling, but I think the interpretation of the use of the crèche is probably correct. It is up to us to make sure that the cross, the fact and symbol of redemption, is not allowed to become nothing but an ornament.

In a word then, the event on which we depend most for our salvation depends most on us for its interpretation. And this seems to have been in the mind of Jesus Christ, because of his refusal to interpret his death for us. No more profound paradox abides in our faith and practice than this one, which, in effect, has the Christ say to us, "I died for you. It is up to you to know what that means and tell it to the world."

Have you told any one at all lately?

# On Not Loving Everyone All The Time

January 31, 1982

*Matthew 5:43-48; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 14:25-2;*

*I Corinthians 13*

Would Jesus ever have written the likes of I Corinthians 13? I doubt it. If he had been as closely involved with the Corinthian church as was the Apostle Paul, would he have written such a scripture? Probably not. This premise is based on the knowledge that Jesus shied away from using the word *love* in the form of a noun. On those rare occasions when he did, he nearly always connected the noun *love* with God or man; love does not appear in the abstract with Jesus but is usually related to an object.

With no desire to disparage Paul's great hymn of love, it does need saying that he wrote of love in such a manner as to make it rather easy to lift a passage like I Corinthians 13 from its context. In context, and with just the right touch of satire — I had never thought of I Corinthians as having satire until now; think about that — it stands as a powerful appeal to the Corinthians to stop their fussing, put an end to their bickering, desist from contending for the superiority of this or that particular gift, and to discontinue the conflicts threatening to create a schism in the Corinthian church. But with words of strength and beauty, to be sure, Paul wrote of love in abstract and idealistic terms, wrote of love as a virtue to be achieved, as a garment to be put on, thus making love almost an end in itself rather than a means to an end. He left love without an object. As a consequence, one can become a loving person floating hither and yon with no particular place to light and

no special one to love — to the end that love can mean little or nothing.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." This is true. But if I have love but do not know how or when to practice it with reference to ones who need it most — according to time and circumstance as well as other considerations — then all I have is love without ways for its effective and redemptive expression and use. Such a matter takes on heavy significance when it becomes apparent that the capacity for making commitment and choices and for the administration of justice requires selective love, which is to be directed to a particular object in specific times and circumstances. Loving everyone all the time under every circumstance and to the same degree and in the same way militates against the making of commitments and choices and the administration of justice.

A study of scripture indicates that Jesus both talked and practiced a selective love rather than one universal and indiscriminate. He related such selective and particular love to matters of commitment and choices more than he did to the administration of justice. He did not seem to be occupied extraordinarily with the theories and practices of justice. This may have been so because of his knowledge that God caused rain to fall on both just and unjust, and, thus, the arbitrary will of God could not be submitted to some external norm of justice. Despite this fact, the manner in which Jesus loved does enable a person to make commitments and choices and to administer justice with greater effect than does the practice of loving everyone equally and at the same time and in all circumstances.

Such specificity characterizes his answer to the question, Who is my neighbor? in the wake of the statement of the Great Commandment, when he featured in his parable a ditched victim and a Samaritan with enough concern to interrupt his journey. Such specificity marks the command to love one's enemies and spells out that love with a turning the other cheek, giving an extra coat, or going the second mile. Here also in the scriptures is a kind of selective love which refuses to take bread from the table of the children of Israel and throw it to Gentile dogs. Can you imagine such hard words accompanying love? They do not give forth the sound of love, when first heard, until one recognizes that the love

of Jesus for his own people, the Jews, was intense enough to cause him to use such stern metaphors in order to explain the priorities of his ministry.

Even sterner and calling for a fiercer love are the words in Luke — Matthew is more temperate with his injunction against loving father and mother more than Jesus — which reads, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brother and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Imagine what you would do if faced with the command to hate your children as the price of following after Jesus. In this respect, and with the important reminder that the word *hate* in this context should be translated as “love less,” it is, nevertheless, ironically so that sometimes, in order to love this person or that in specific situations, one has to make choices for the one and against the other, which for the latter individual seems to be nothing short of hate.

Let me again state the major premise before spelling out a few examples of its application. Loving everyone equally and in the same way in every time and situation ensues in loving no one in any particular and meaningful and redemptive way. Moreover, maintaining a stance of loving everyone all the time provides a means, whether intentionally or not, of evading the responsibility of loving a particular person or group because of a special situation or a serious need. In all probability Jesus would have commanded the Corinthians to love one another — and in specific ways — as a means of settling their differences. He would have hesitated to put love in the kind of abstract and romantic form that Paul did. It is the love of Jesus, articulated in his teachings, which is more likely to issue into commitments, to the making of choices, and to the administration of justice than is the kind of love which is outlined in I Corinthians 13.

As a first example, let it be noted that Jesus minced no words in demanding selective love for him and his mission, if anyone intended to be his disciple. Two matters herein are of genuine importance. We need to recall what has already been said: that *hate* in such context means to love less rather than to seek the destruction of the object hated. In the second instance, we need to recognize that Jesus was speaking of a love for the Father and the Son and the kingdom purpose, which was so pointed, so defined, so particular, and so

intense that love for another to a lesser degree amounted to, or appeared to amount to, nothing short of hate. However, when Jesus used such illustrations, the stress lay with that to which we should give our fidelity rather than that upon which we ought to turn our backs. Love makes for commitment to the object of devotion rather than the rejection of that to which we do not give allegiance. Commitment to Christ rather than rejection of the world is always the most appropriate witness.

What is true of the love that assured Christian discipleship is also true of love which assures the integrity and endurance of marriage. Again, although the emphasis should be on love rather than hate, I must say that my concern about the young who are marrying one another these days is that they do not appear to hate other options and persons sufficiently because of the love for one another. Therefore their love lacks sharpness and particularity and uniqueness. The vow to forsake all others is not repeated in word or practice with any degree of intensity. But take the time to consider what it means. Forsake means to renounce what was formerly cherished with no intention of recovering or resuming what has been left. Forsake means to withdraw, even to abandon. What needs understanding is that forsaking does not make love necessary but love makes forsaking necessary. To love one man or one woman in a marriage covenant does not, and need not, mean that the two find it impossible to love anyone — that is not a good prospect for marriage — but that the two choose to love one another in such a definite way that others are necessarily set aside. Anyone who seeks to bring an affair to an end can certainly do so by applying selective love to the unfortunate situation. So many people wish to hang onto affairs under the guise of wanting to love everyone and therefore draw back from hurting the third party of a triangle. But the affair is over if selective love is used, where the devotion and commitment is made to the spouse at the expense of the other, even to the point of hurting the other. This same kind of selectivity applies to institutions and even to one's country. Commitment is not possible if we love all institutions all of the time to an equal degree. Sometimes we must love the church more than other institutions, and sometimes we must pick which among institutions of like kind to give our primary loyalty and allegiance. If we fail to do this, we will be committed to none and, therefore, faithful to none.

The principle of selective love is never more applicable than when it is brought to bear upon the administration of justice. Justice often demands loving the poor, or the weak, or the minority, or the set-apart, or the disfranchised at the expense of the well-to-do, the powerful, and the affluent. It is a distressing realization to understand that in order to administer justice to the underprivileged and the ostracized one must act in such a way as to appear to hate one's own kind. The poor, the disfranchised, and the underprivileged cannot usually achieve justice in their own behalf. Justice has to be secured for them by the powerful and the affluent. Therefore, it nearly always entails one's turning against one's own kind in order to secure justice for the underdog. In days past, when the integration question was at its most critical point, it was not uncommon for those of us who advocated the cause of the blacks to be called a "nigger lover." What lay behind that epithet, however, was the certainty on the part of those who used it that the "nigger lover" was primarily a "honky hater."

All of this is to say that loving everyone all the time in every circumstance and in the same way and to the same degree is, indeed, an appealing idealism. But even if it were possible, it is not to be recommended in the reality of our world and in the relationships called for in that world. If we are to have meaningful, effective, and redemptive relationships both to persons and to things, we must know how to love selectively with particularity and uniqueness. When love does not ensue in commitment, relationships, and justice, it is little more than a nice word.



# The Word From Above and the Word From The Side

May 13, 1984

*Amos 1:1-2; Hosea 1:1-3; Matthew 11:1-6, 25-29*

When was the last time that you thought of yourself as a prophet? Never? If so, then I would suppose you find the question surprising, even a bit amusing. If you do find it surprising and amusing, why so? The role of prophet is not reserved for the professional clergy alone. Amos straightened that out long ago when he said to the high priest Amaziah, "I am not a prophet; I am not the son of a prophet. I belong to no prophets' organization. I am not a professional prophet. But the Lord took me from following my flock and told me to prophesy to his people Israel. Now, hear the word of the Lord."

I do not know exactly why it is that the church, particularly the congregational, free church, can understand itself as a priesthood of believers. However much you practice it or not, most of you would say that you understand what it is in a church like this to be members of the priesthood of believers. What about a "prophet-hood of believers"? If there is nothing to prevent each of us from being a priest, there surely is nothing to prevent each of us from being a prophet. It is not reserved for the professional clergy. In a paraphrase of B.D. Napier, we may define a prophet as one who understands and interprets history in terms of divine concern, in terms of divine purpose, in terms of divine participation. In other words, a prophet is responsible to and for the word and the work of God in the world, being addressed by it and proclaiming it in all of one's relationships and affairs.

The burden upon the prophet is to look at history while looking for and listening for the word of God, thereby to understand history, to interpret history, in terms of God's concerned and purposeful participation in our affairs. Now if that be true — that the responsibility, which of course is laid upon us, is to make sure that we know how to find, to hear, to recognize the word of God as it addresses us in the rounds of our lives — how does one find, how does one hear, how does one recognize the word of God in the modern world?

Some people would say that's not really a very important question. We have the Bible, and because we have the Bible, therefore we have the word of God, a word to be seen, a word to hear. But that is to oversimplify the matter. There were prophets before the Bible was written. And whatever the word of God had to say to them, however the word of God may have come to them, however they recognized the word of God, we must also recognize the word of God in somewhat the same way. This is one of the big arguments of our time. As we shrink back from the secular world which, more and more, hoots at the idea of God participating or speaking in any way in history, some of us rely upon this book and say that it is our only source, it is our only guide. Those who are known by the name "inerrantists" are people who, rather than being responsible to and for the Word of God, are actually responsible to and for the Bible. They understand history not in terms of divine concern, purpose, and participation; they understand history in terms of the Bible. They speak not the word of God but the Bible to the world. And when they do this, they give us dead religion.

Now, this is not to say that there is nothing to be said for the Bible. This is not to say that the Bible is not a sure and authoritative word. But it is to say, first of all, that the Bible, like the church, in the words of Alan Richardson, derives its authority from Christ, who did become the Word — the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us. Therefore this book derives its authority from that Word made flesh. If Christ is unique, the Bible is unique. If Christ is not unique, the Bible is not unique. If Christ is the Son of God, then the Bible is a one-of-a-kind book. If Christ is simply a good man, albeit a very good man, then the Bible is, by the same token, a good book, even perhaps a work of religious genius. But the authority of the book is in Christ. Now, whenever we hear the word of God, whenever we think we see the word of God in the world, we have to check it by

this book. We have to check it by this book because the single most authoritative thing about the book is that it is a historical witness to Jesus Christ, a witness given by those who lived with him, who anticipated him, who came in the wake of his resurrection. So there is no word of God which can be called legitimate unless it is checked by the book. And yet the book, in and of itself, without the authority of Christ, without its witness to the Christ who lived, died, and was risen — then this book is only a dead word. The authority of the book is not based upon its content but upon its witness to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Does that sound complicated? It is. If I've lost you, come back, because now I want to tell you about Hosea and Amos, and that will clear things up. Amos was a prophet to whom the word appeared to come from the side — not so much vertically, initially, as to one side or the other of his life in the world — and it seems to have been a word which he saw. He was a man who had the vision: the plumb line, the basket of summer fruit. He was also the man who saw the suffering of the people around him. Did you catch the distinction? It says, "The words which Amos saw concerning Israel," and then he spoke them: "The Lord roars in Zion; the top of Mount Carmel withers; the fields dry up." But it was Amos who talked about the rich, those who exploited the poor, who would buy the poor for a pair of sandals, who would buy the poor, who would get slaves by an exchange of silver, who dealt with false balances, who sold rotten wheat. It was Amos who saw all the sins of the world around him: dishonesty, corruption, exploitation, disfranchising of the weak.

The difference between Amos and simply some kind of seer was this: when he looked upon the suffering of the world around him, when he looked upon the inequities, the indignities, the evils of the time, he also looked for the word of God. He would spell out those terrible sins which people were heaping upon one another. He would talk of justice. But he always brought in that the Lord would not forget those deeds.

Now if you are a person who looks with great grief and anger and indignation at the terrible sins of the world, those sins which one part of humanity heaps upon another part of humanity, you are well on the way to being a prophet. A prophet is a person who knows what it is to care when another person is being wrecked,

broken, hurt by the unkindness and the unfairness and the malice of a fellow human being or a group of fellow human beings. Yes, I warn you: if you care, if you look, if you can see, you are on the way to being a prophet. But if in seeing all that, you do not also see the word of the Lord coming at you from the side, you don't turn out to be a prophet; you become a problem solver. You begin to solve things, and then they even elect you to office. We are in the midst of that now, are we not? One of the things I hear from all the candidates is that they know how to solve problems. How long, O Lord, shall we hope in that, only to be disappointed?

The word from the side: it is there. God is with the downtrodden. Christ is in the midst of those who are poor, who are hurt, who are broken, who are lonely. The word is out there to the side. Look for it.

There is another word: the word from above — a word that is like a bolt out of the blue. When Hosea heard the word of the Lord, he did not seem to be engaged in any great enterprise of Jewish or Christian social action. Apparently he was looking for a wife. Now the word from above seems to be — according to the scripture, the word is heard more than seen. It is a word that is more unexpected; it is a word for which one does not look so much as it simply comes: "When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, he said to Hosea . . ." (Can you imagine putting this kind of burden upon a prophet?) He said, "Now, Hosea, as one of my people — as a religious person in the community— I want you to go marry a harlot." That's not a very good start for a prophet. Prophets are known by the company they keep, and here God was sending Hosea, perhaps, down to the temple to pick up one of the temple prostitutes and marry her. And he said, "It is because Israel has been a harlot to me, has been unfaithful. It is because of that that I want you to marry Gomer. If you have children, we'll call the children Not Pitied, Not My People, Nobody. But you see, I want you to marry this harlot, and forgive her when she proves to be unfaithful. Go back down there and get her and bring her home and discipline her, but be faithful to her and say that she is still your wife. By doing that as a prophet, I will be saying to my people, "I forgive you as well."

Isn't that a strange word? Do you reckon anybody could get by with that today? You see, Hosea was called about the way Jeremiah was called: he wasn't too much involved. Jeremiah was called before he left his mother's womb, and Hosea hadn't shown himself to

be any great social-action person. He hadn't shown any tremendous promise. He was just looking for a wife and wound up with a prostitute — as a prophecy.

It is easier to see the word from the side than it is to hear the word from above. It is easier to get started as a prophet when you are out there really putting your fingers into the mire of human despair and human degradation and hoping to dig up not only a word of your own concern but a word of the Lord that you can pick up and look at and say to the world, "Here it is." It is not that easy, always, with the Word from above. Amos was able to uncover the word of God as divine concern; Hosea had to deal with the word of God as divine purpose. The purpose of God is usually more hidden in the world than is the concern of God. Jesus — did he not say in that parable about the last, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, my people, my brethren — the sick, the hungry, the broken, the imprisoned — as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it also unto me." That's more easily seen than a prophet marrying a prostitute in order to reveal the purpose of God. It is because of this that so often we say the only prophecy there is comes from the side; that's what we can see; that's what we can get our teeth in, and that's what we've got to bank on.

Jesus said the prophet must do both. When John the Baptist was languishing in prison and wondering whether or not Jesus was the one who had been sent — the Messiah, the Christ whom he had prophesied about — he sent disciples and said, "Tell us. Are you the one? Are you the real article?" Jesus said to those disciples, "You go back and tell John what you've seen." What had they seen? The deaf hear, the lame walk, the sick are healed, the dead are raised. But he also said, "Go back and tell John what you've heard." What did they hear? That the gospel, the good news, was being preached to the poor. Wasn't that strange? Why didn't Jesus say, "The lame walk, the lepers are healed, the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are on social security?"

Jesus then explained it: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will." "No one comes to the Father but by me." The Son understands the Father; the Father understands the Son. Here Christ was saying, "The divine purpose is hidden in me." Then he

said to those dispossessed Jews, in a sense, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden (with the yoke of the law), and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." That was the gospel that he preached to the poor.

I drove back through southeastern Kentucky last Tuesday, through the worst floods that that comparatively poor section of the state of Kentucky has suffered in the last fifty years. I saw trailers and saw houses floating down small streams, the water lapping up on the shoulders of the road. And I felt great despair because it was impressed upon me once again that the poor are not only the chief victims of human manipulation; the poor are the chief victims of natural disaster. The poor are the chief victims of what we call the acts of God. I saw them standing on their porches with rowboats and motorboats going over to pick them up, their total possessions clasped in their two arms. I saw them standing by the side of the road, no umbrellas, no raincoats — there with the rain pelting down, shivering against a cool spring day, a battered suitcase at their feet, waiting for the state patrol or the National Guard or the Red Cross to come and pick them up and find them a place to stay.

The poor are the victims of the acts of God. And the Amos in me wanted to cry out and say, "Why is it always like this?" I thought I could see God's word in looking from one side of the road to the other, and to say that is wrong and that is damnable and that there must be an end to it. But as I drove along very slowly, sometimes with a sheet of water already on the road, and I looked into their faces, lined with worry but also creased with good humor — and because I know those mountain people, because I've preached in their midst, because my mother was one of them, I knew that if I stopped and said, "How do you interpret this part of your history?" they would say, "It's God's will." Unless some fancy theologian gets hold of them, that's where they'll get their comfort: "It's God's will." Mysterious. But those people could see, as they have seen throughout the misery of Appalachia — those people could understand themselves in a strange and paradoxical way as agents of the purpose of God. That also is prophecy. That also is a prophet's word. Amen.

# Job Backs Down

*July, 1968*

*Job 13:13-19, 40:3-5, 42:1-6*

"If he slays me, I will have no hope, but I will argue the rightness of my ways to his face." That was the way Job felt about his situation, and it reveals that he was more a stubborn than a patient man. He did not do what he said he was going to do despite his stubbornness. He kept daring God to answer his questions, to meet him like a man, I suppose, rather than some lofty divinity. In his own good time, God called his bluff and the great face-to-face encounter came to pass. But Job did not follow through. He hedged a bit at the beginning and explained that he had spoken once about his problems and God's unfairness, in fact, he had mentioned it twice and that was enough. He had nothing more to say. But finally we hear our boil-burdened hero exclaiming: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

If you have ever been hit by suffering and affliction, with bad luck and a torturous streak of misfortune which you did not think you deserved, if like Job, you decided that God was a poor excuse for divinity to have let all this happen to you, then Job is a good story for you to read and try to understand.

There are some striking parallels between this story of Job and what seems to be the history of modern man. Job then becomes something more than a folk hero of Judaism. He has in his story some of the antecedents for modern secular humanity. Let us look at some of the parallels which point up the similarities between Job and us.

1. Job was a troubled man in a troubled world. The social life of Israel had come to the crossroads where there was no longer a pat and neat answer for human suffering. Some that were good suffered. Some that were not so good escaped suffering. Secular man now is a troubled man in a troubled world, and there seems to be no logical explanation for it all.

2. Job stubbornly declared that the trouble did not come because of his sin. He openly declared that God was arbitrarily unjust and unfair. Modern secular man protests a similar innocence. He is not so quick to blame God because he no longer takes God that seriously. We shall deal with this dissimilarity later on. For now, it is enough to establish modern man's innocence, as was the case for Job.

3. Job's evangelistic friends pounced on the plight of the hero and used his unfortunate condition to expound their favorite theological doctrines. Job pays no more attention to them than intelligent secular man pays to Billy Graham, who uses the present condition to advance his affinity for the doctrine of the second coming of Christ.

4. At the very center of Job's distress, he and his friends engaged in an academic discussion about God and man. Even now, God is very much on the lips of modern man, but he is not called for in the stresses and strains of living.

5. Job's God was silent. He did not readily appear on the scene of Job's vast dissatisfaction. He did not intrude himself into the situation. Job continued to suffer with his deprivation and his boils, and God seemed very far away. God is now silent. He is obscure, or even hidden, in the processes of history. His absence suggests to some men that the world he has made has outgrown him and that its perplexities are much too tough for him. Some people suggest that he is dead and that his followers are trying to keep his passing a secret as if he were another Father Divine or some immortal Communist leader.

Here are the parallels. The end of secular man's narrative is not yet apparent. We are afraid that it will not be the happy ending that characterizes the end of the story of Job. It is time to see how that one turned out.

In the case of Job, the silence of God came to an end. It is here that Job's similarity with modern secular man ceases. Like Jeremiah, Job

gave a curious testimony to a God that he thought was crooked, deceitful and unfair. By *testimony* I mean that Job assumed the existence of God no matter what. He dared God to meet with him and discuss with him God's own arbitrary injustice. He was willing to meet God like a prince, and he seemed to assume that God would come off second-best in any such encounter, for God would meet a righteous man, whom he had no right to treat so rudely. Job was prepared to stack the forces of his own integrity over against the supposed holiness of God. It was then he got a response — but not the kind he had bargained for and not the kind he wanted.

God called Job's bluff. But at least the hero took his chances. In our sophisticated stance, our certainty about what is ethical and right, our preconditions as to who and what God has to be, we prohibit an authentic experience with God. We militate against a possible relationship. We know the same vivid suffering that Job did. For us this means that there is no God or that he is somehow laid up and out of commission. For Job this meant that God existed in some unfair kind of judgment. For us this means the nonexistence of God.

God takes seriously those who accuse him of being the wrong kind of God, because he knows that this means that men take his existence seriously. We have missed this turn at this precise juncture. We have presumed that unless God fits the 1968 models of divinity he does not exist at all. We have written God off because he does not fit what we mean by *love, justice, relevance*, et al.

We have not dared to take what Job took. We, therefore, either have to decide that there is no God or that there is no such thing as justice or love. Or if we do decide that the latter is still operative, we have to assume that this is a human quality and that we do not love because God first loved us.

The only other choice is the Joban choice. That is to dare to say that God is not fair. That is to say, with Jeremiah, that he, like a deceitful brook giving promise of living water, is always nothing more than a dusty and dried up spring when one comes to drink. If a man believes in God's existence and God's rule over the whole of life, and if he looks full into the face of the mystery of evil, he will almost be forced to blame God rather than himself for these conditions. It would take too much of an outsized ego to believe that our sin were great enough to explain the whole human misery as it now stands.

It is the time now for man to call God to account. I do not mean in order to fulfill the plot of some historical drama. I mean that this is really the essential question. If God is good, why our suffering and why our evil world? Why do good men who take the part of the downtrodden wind up prone before the assassin's bullet? Why do good and concerned parents find children going wrong? Why do the better men for political position somehow fail to win the support of their parties? How can the gun lobby make its point so successfully? Why can we not find our way out of cruel war? How can the dropouts love everybody other than those who have loved them, unwisely perhaps, but with no less concern? And why do the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer?

If we do not want to go the way of the secular; if we are unwilling to write God off; if we still cling to some stubborn belief, although the evidence is very much against us, that there is a God; if we honestly look at ourselves and know that we are trying to achieve some semblance of good, that we are not brazenly sinful, that we do not applaud the evils of our society; if we are of this kind, then we have to ask God some questions. We are in the same state that Job is. We cannot think anything other than that God has lost his sense of justice and fairness.

If this should get a rise out of God and he should answer us — or rather ask questions of us as he did in the case of Job — we probably will not be very happy about this turn of events. Job got no answer about his own suffering. In this respect God was extraordinarily gracious. After all, there are not many possible answers — that is, if suffering and sin have a link. Either man is no good or God is no good — that is, if one thinks there is still a God. In either case, man would be the loser. There really is no response to the problem of suffering. When an evil man suffers there is no question. When a good man suffers there is no answer.

Neither is it likely that God will try to prove that he is alive and good any more than was the case with Job. God has not bothered to make his modern morticians sound outlandish. Nor has God made any overt reference to his own sincerity by speaking in husky tones, or a whisper, or declaring outright how sincere he is.

If and when he answers us, it will probably be as he answered Job: with questions that point to his power over all things. The poet

McLeish has argued that Job asked God for a show of justice, and all Job received was a show of divine muscles. McLeish does not like it this way. I cannot agree with him.

Does man need any other evidence, when the story of his life is so completely a mystery? Life is of such a style and bent these days that the question is not one of God's goodness but of power. No matter what he may think and how he may feel about the complexities of life, if he is powerless to do anything about it, then the question of his goodness is academic. Perhaps Job never asked the questions that God answered by his own set of questions, but what he answered is the basic question nevertheless. For the thing that most of us want to know, if we think of God at all, is, what can he do about the world once he makes up his mind what he wants to do about it?

It is perfectly obvious that we will want a new set of illustrations. God is revealed to Job, through the confrontation, as the almighty God of creation. We need to see him as the almighty God of deliverance. We are no longer concerned with who made the whale. We are more like Jonah. We would like to know how to get out of its belly and out of the powers of this world which threaten to undo us. Can God do anything about war, race, poverty...? You know the list, and you will surely want to add some personal touches to it.

By raising the issue, God revealed to Job the essential question. It is the question of his power. That is still the question, and we cannot know the answer except by faith. We do not know the power of God until we throw ourselves at his mercy and see whether or not he is able to deliver us.

There is a finale to this story of Job that is so often overlooked, to man's detriment. We are satisfied usually to find that Job repented and despised himself and that then God turned things around and gave Job back his friends and his wealth and his prestige.

Tucked away in these final sentences, may be the treasure of the entire narrative. After God refused to bow down to Job's petty argument, after he overwhelmed our hero with his display of power, after the hero had been reduced to dust and ashes, then God appoints Job, the dust and ashes man, to be the intercessor for his wise friends who had done all that preaching to him when he was down. And the point was that God would not deal with them justly

— although Job was crying for justice — because if he dealt with them justly they would have been in great trouble. God, instead, uses the man who had cried the loudest and longest for justice as the agent of his mercy for those who had used Job's sores for their own theological advantage. Job had to see firsthand that if God dealt justly with all men, then the complexity of good and evil in life would be too much for us. Justice for Job would have meant the end of his friends if God were to be consistently just with all men. God has power to show mercy and compassion to those whom He chooses to show mercy and compassion. If God must be just according to our standards, then he must be merciful according to our standards, and that would prohibit many of our fellows from receiving both justice and mercy.

What is the final plank in the story of Job? Namely, that this man who cried so much for justice became an agent of mercy for others who did not, in that moment, dare to cry for justice. And that, in turn, must surely have revealed to Job that all of us cannot always rely on justice. We are dependent upon God's power also to be merciful when he chooses to be so.

# To Act is to Compromise

May 6, 1984

*Genesis 9:20-28; Romans 7:13-20, 8:28-30*

Noah, famed boat builder and ship captain, followed another line of work after the flood. Apparently for the last three hundred and fifty years of his life, he was a grower of crops and of fruit, a tiller of the ground. Perhaps he had never heard about Cain's troubles as a farmer, or if he had heard about that, he may have forgotten the story. Or it could be that after being the great flood's hero, he decided that God would have greater regard for his offering of the best of the fruit of the land than had been the case with Cain.

In any event, this epic hero one day deciding to relax after his labor, drank of the liquid treasure of the fruit and became intoxicated. The story says that naked he lay in the tent, in a drunken stupor. Nakedness before the Fall, in the book of Genesis — in the Garden of Eden — was nothing of which to be ashamed. But after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, nakedness was something of which to be ashamed. Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nakedness after their disobedience. Throughout the scripture, particularly the Old Testament, nakedness is a symbol for unrighteousness, which explains the frequent phrase that people desire to be clothed in righteousness. So, naked he lay in his tent, an old man, a father, in a drunken stupor.

When Ham walked in, apparently uninvited and unannounced, he saw his father's nakedness, and he reacted morally. The morals of Ham went like this: You call a spade a spade. Even if it is your father who is in a state of embarrassment, you do not spare your father; you do not give your father any particular consideration; you tell the story. You see, for some reason there is a moral aspect in

the whole ethical system whereby we say that anybody whose sin is already exposed should be further exposed. Let it all hang out. And that's what Ham did. Helping his father not at all and acting on principle and morality, he went to tell the older brothers "Our father is dead drunk and in a stage of great embarrassment."

Now Shem and Japheth also reacted morally, but their morality was of a different kind. They said they could not let their father remain exposed in his unrighteous state before the world, and so they decided that they would cover Dad's nakedness. You might say that they were merciful; their morality had as much grace in it as it did justice. But I would remind you that the way they pulled this off was ridiculously funny. They backed into the tent with averted eyes; they had some kinds of garment draped across the back of their shoulders. I guess they knew the measurement of the tent before they went in, because, walking backward and counting off the steps, let us presume, they got to the place where they thought maybe their father was lying in his naked and unrighteous state, and they dropped the garment on him and covered his nakedness and covered his unrighteousness. But, oh my, there wasn't a bit of dirt on them; they were as innocent as they had ever been. The forgiveness cost little or nothing because they had no idea what they were forgiving; they never saw it.

Now, when Noah came to, he also reacted morally: Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, tit for tat. My younger son disgraced me; my younger son did not have mercy upon me. My younger son did not treat me with any favor, and therefore cursed be my son and his offspring. I disinherited him, and I hope to make his children slaves of their cousins. So goes the story of Noah and his sons — this great hero having become a drunk, maybe for the only time in his life.

To that incident there were three moral reactions: the morality of exposure — do not hide sin (that usually belongs, I think, to the fundamentalists); the morality of ignorant mercy — if you can be gracious without dirtying your own hands, do so; and the morality of rough and ready justice — giving back what one receives. In each of these cases I think we can say that Noah and his sons were operating upon a kind of pure principle. They had a certain idea of what was moral and acted on that and nothing else, and therefore their actions in each case left much to be desired.

I hear people say occasionally that they act on pure principle. The trouble with acting on pure principle is that the action is always so narrow, so precise, so single-shot in its effect that it misses the wider picture. I have a colleague who has boasted through the years that he never lets friends come between his convictions and himself. He's a man of pure principle. And as I've known him through these years, I hope it not unkind to say that I can count his principles on one hand and I don't need even the first finger to count his friends. Almost always, to act effectively, relevantly, is to compromise. Any action taken on pure, unadulterated principle will make nothing greater than a pinprick in the fabric of life. To act is to compromise.

Now of course, there are some who say, "My principles are so important to me that I cannot in any way compromise them." And these are the people who do nothing, and their name is legion. The world is filled with people who are paralyzed because they do not want to compromise their convictions. They are something like Shem and Japheth, who really could not deal with the situation of their drunken old father because they did not want to get tainted.

So, if to act is to compromise, does that mean that we are able, therefore, in life to compromise with no problem whatsoever? Not at all. There are at least two great dangers having to do with compromise against which we must always be alert, against which we must always guard. First of all, the world is so complex that whenever we begin to compromise principles, we are likely to confuse those principles to such a degree as to lose sight of them. Let me point out, by way of illustration, what may seem a fairly harmless example — that of getting married. I am willing to suggest that in the act of getting married we compromise many of the principles which make for peace in the world. Eric Fromm, for example, has come up in one of his books with that intriguing phrase called "universal narcissism." Fromm wants us to learn how to love all of humanity the way we love ourselves, extending this narcissism beyond the individual, beyond the group, beyond the nation to all humanity. He even calls for a "Holiday of Man" as the highest holiday of the year — universal narcissism. Eric Fromm was convinced that it is only possible for a man or a woman to be human "only in a climate in which he (or she) can expect that he and his

children will live to see the next year, and many more years to come."

Now do you see how that principle of narcissism, universally applied, would seem to be the ground of peace — nations and groups are transcended by a love for all humankind. I went to a wedding yesterday and it just shot all of that principle to pieces. These people stood up there and gave themselves to one another and said, "We're going to forsake everybody else, we are going to abandon everybody else, and give ourselves only one to the other." Marriage is a form of hate for the whole wide world. Vows? Have you ever stopped to think how powerful and ominous a word that is — that "I shall forsake all others?" Obviously, that has sexual relevance and application most of all, but it also includes the whole realm of our life together as a family.

Where does nationalism come from? Nationalism does not come altogether from love of country. Nationalism is based a great deal upon the family. When the man and the woman have their children, while they may not want their children to grow up in an armed camp, an armed fortress, they do want a nation strong enough to protect their children against the enemy, whether real or imagined. Whenever we get married, whenever we raise a family, we compromise the principle of peace and worldwide love.

So did Jesus. Jesus said, "To follow me, you will have to leave father, mother." He knew that if the family ever became entrenched and if people could not break from the family, the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world was doomed. He even intimated that the reason you can have peace in heaven is that you don't get married in heaven. You know those people wanted to know about the woman who was widowed successively after having married seven brothers; they asked to whom she would belong in heaven. Jesus said you aren't given in marriage nor received in marriage in the resurrection. I suppose that was not only a guard against internal domestic strife, but think of what a donnybrook it could have been if the seven brothers had been arguing about that one woman there in the hereafter. So you see, somehow the principles of peace get lost in all that, in a harmless, nice thing like getting married and having children.

The other danger of compromise is that as we begin to use means

to reach ends, there is always the danger, because we know we are compromising, that we shall moralize on those means and those methods to such an extent as to replace the original principle. I think the best example of that also has to do with peace. The principle of peace, the moral and ethical commitment to peace — these have been replaced by moral and ethical commitments to the nuclear argument. We do more moralizing today about nuclear deterrence, building up so that war is unthinkable, or about nuclear build-down, or freeze, or disarmament, so that you can't have that kind of war. Now, I come down ever so lightly on the side of the nuclear build-down people. I think that methodology, that compromise, is more moral because it holds possibilities for killing fewer people. But I come down lightly on that because I cannot get as moral about the matter as some other people. The moralizing on means — the moralizing about methods until the ultimate principle is replaced or substituted for, that seems to me to be a real danger in compromise. And yet, compromise we must. So where does that leave us?

If you anticipate that at the end of this sermon I am going to engage in "God-talk," you are as right as rain, because now I am going to engage in "God-talk." If to act is to compromise, if compromise is almost inevitable if you do anything or if you do anything that has some kind of relevant and widespread consequences — if compromise of principle is apparently not only necessary but inevitable — then I would suggest that we need to learn how to compromise within the context of grace. How agonizing is our attempt to compromise without destroying the principle or without losing sight of the principle. How utterly painful to find ourselves using this means or that method and trying to give it some moral, ethical respectability! I am suggesting that in the matter of "God-talk" we relax about our compromise — maybe even enjoy it — and understand the freedom that we have in God's grace.

Paul made a confession about himself. He said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Even Paul tried to get out of it a little bit by saying, "It is sin in me that does this." When he admitted, "I do not do what I want to do," Paul was saying, "There is some judgment upon me; there is a principle, a law, that convicts me." The reason that we

cannot do that law, the reason that we cannot do that principle is that we always have to compromise. Paul put it in the starker terms: He said, "Had it not been for the law, I would never have known what it was to covet. But now that I know what it is to covet, I enjoy coveting and I am more susceptible to coveting than ever. That's what the law has done to me." We are not alien to that kind of experience, where we starkly disobey the principle, but most of the time we just compromise.

How does grace have to do with compromise? Paul brought this dilemma to bear. He asked the question finally, "Who shall deliver this miserable body of death that I am? Who shall deliver me from it, oh, wretched man that I am? Thanks be to Christ." Then in the very next chapter he says to these same Romans, "God is at work in everything." Most of the time we are just thinking about tragedy and death and sickness and destruction. But "God is at work in everything for those who love him and are called according to his purpose." This means that in the context of grace, if you love God, if you are on a mission of God, you can almost do that old promise of ancient times: you can love God and do what you please.

We live in grace; we need not be paralyzed for fear of compromising the principle, because if we live in grace, we live in forgiveness for our imperfection and for our imperfect ways. If we live in grace and we lose sight of the principle because we become so confused, it is by God's mercy that we may see a better way. And if we live in grace, we do not have to moralize on our means to make them perfect. Reinhold Niebuhr has warned us many times: in a finite world and a finite condition, do not believe that you are capable of envisioning the perfect ideal. And even more, do not assume that in a fallen, finite way you have the means by which to reach the perfect ideal. Niebuhr says that if we start out like that, sooner or later we wind up doing one of three things: we go crazy; or we fake it and say we have reached the ideal (they have bumper stickers, you know: I've found it); or we confess. Confession is the best.

In the last analysis, when we know that God works in everything for good to his people, with those who love him and are in his mission, on his mission, we do not have to worry about corrupting our principles because they were corrupt to begin with. Where did we ever get the idea that we know the perfect answer to anything?

So, it is when we learn that the will of God and our ideal are not necessarily one and the same that we are set free. Our freedom is not of compromise but of grace, to do in God's grace what one understands to be God's purpose. If we do that, we need not worry, in the last analysis, about principle or compromise; but, this is true only in the last analysis. Grace and peace be yours. Amen.



# Evangelism at the Exits

*October 24, 1982*

*I Kings 17:9-19; John 21:15-19*

Where do we come in? With respect to a particular function in the redemptive enterprise of God, what do you think is, or should be, our specific role both as a church and as individual Christians? I believe that we come in at the place where many people are going out, going out, that is, from the church and perhaps even the kingdom of God. I venture the possibility that we have been appointed by God to practice evangelism at the exits, exercising a backdoor evangelism in order to intercept those people who are departing from the church and its mission.

I say so because, in the first place, the fact that almost as many people are leaving the church as are entering it legitimates evangelism at the exits. In the second place, my experience as the minister of this church has convinced me that backdoor evangelism is our particular calling. If the record is at all indicative, except for the children of families already belonging to this church, we have not mastered the art of primary evangelism, the winning of initial converts from unbelief into belief. While it is true that few children have grown up in this church without being baptized into Christ, we have not baptized many adults on a confession of faith. And we have properly refused to baptize adults from other churches, deeming this to be a practice which inevitably stigmatizes the churches of other denominations.

What we have accomplished, I hope according to God's will, is bringing a good number of disillusioned Christians to a renewal of faith and participation in the life and mission of the church. Such a ministry does not attract great notice and lacks the ingredients of

the spectacular, but I believe that it is within the will of God. And if this is the case, our responsibility is to affirm our evangelism at the exits and to become the best backdoor evangelists that we can possibly be.

Although never given the name as such, backdoor evangelism occupies a prominent place in the scriptures. There must have been on the bulletin boards of faith, in biblical times, a sign containing the words of Jesus given to the apostles when sending them out upon their mission- "He that endures to the end will be saved." Jesus seems to have placed great store in those who endured. John's gospel tells us of the occasion, on which many of the disciples had departed unable to stand the hard sayings of Jesus, when he asked of the remainder, the twelve, "Will you also go away?" That was one of Christ's most poignant questions. Concern for those once within the fold or the family is also a dominant note in the Bible, a note that is manifest in the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. Other examples are at hand, but I choose to dwell at greater length on the stories of Elijah and of Simon Peter.

Our Old Testament lesson describes Elijah at a time when he was on the way out from his mission. Running for his life from the wrath of Jezebel, the prophet was holed up in a cave when the Lord found him. And when the Lord asked him why he was there, Elijah replied, "I have been very jealous for the Lord," but then he added, "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away." Elijah gave voice to two concerns. He was afraid that Jezebel was going to do away with him. And he believed that he was the only person who had remained faithful to God. That simply was not fair in the eyes of the beleaguered prophet.

We encounter hardly any these days who have reason to be afraid for their lives because of their religion. But we do come across a considerable number of people who are at the point of leaving faith and the church because they see themselves as the only ones who are doing anything and what they do is not appreciated. We can surely find some clues for our own evangelism at the exits in the manner with which God dealt with Elijah.

First of all, rather than giving him less to do, God appointed Elijah to do more. But he gave him something more than mere busy work. This cringing prophet, in his cave, was ordered to go and

anoint the new king of Syria and also to anoint the new king of Israel. Even as he was running for his life from the wife of Israel's present king, God told the prophet to anoint the new king-to-be. Successful backdoor evangelism does not contain the promise that if one will only stay with the faith and the mission, one will not have anything else to do.

God also told Elijah, usually a loner by nature — remember him sparking wet wood on the mountain as he stood alone against all those prophets of Baal — that if he would take the trouble to look, he would find seven thousand people in Israel who had never bowed their knees to Baal even a sixteenth of an inch more than Elijah had himself.

But the command which stands out most prominently was that Elijah was to anoint Elisha to be a prophet in his place. So the words of the Lord to Elijah went something like this: Keep on working; you are not alone; appoint someone to take your place. So we must say to those who feel that they are doing it all and no one else is helping: keep on working, God will always have people for his mission, and when the time comes there will be someone to take your place.

Whereas Elijah seems to have been on his way out because of a general disgruntlement, Simon Peter — impatient and impulsive character as he was — decided to take leave as a result of his disillusionment. Christ's mistake in going to Jerusalem, just as Peter had warned, seemed now to have been confirmed. It was true that the resurrection had changed the darkness into light and the following of Jesus had taken on renewed hope. But the other accounts tell of those empty spaces, those times of waiting, between and after the great events of resurrection appearances. Peter was not one to wait, and never had been. Although Peter had been in the upper room when Christ came with the gift of the Spirit, and in all probability heard the confession of Thomas (after his period of doubt), the ingrained restlessness within Simon began to reassert itself. So it was that he persuaded his old fishing cronies, James and John, along with Nathaniel, and would you believe it, Thomas, thereby giving substance to the words of Jesus, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" — in any event, Peter persuaded the lot of

them to go back to Galilee's water and start again fishing for fish. So it was that Simon Peter was making his way to the exits.

But he was interdicted by the Lord. Once more, just as on that other time, they caught nothing until Jesus, at day break, told them where to cast their nets. This time there was no argument; they did as they were instructed, and once again, the catch was more than they could handle.

Then the story changes, and the change is great indeed. There was no second call to follow and become fishers of men. Instead they had breakfast on a catch of one hundred and fifty-three fish. After breakfast, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" "You know I love you," Peter answered three times. And the Lord replied three times in turn, "Feed my sheep." Do you get it? No longer was Peter being asked to be a fisherman, catching people in the nets of primary evangelism. The metaphor was abruptly changed. Peter was now to be a shepherd of the sheep — in the fold, one who tended, fed, nurtured, watched over the flock. The Lord put Peter at the backdoor of the church, there to do his evangelism at the exits, so that the sheep would neither stray nor starve. Had not Jesus, in this same gospel, said of himself, "I am the good shepherd."

May we not be instructed in a similar vein? May it not be that the proof of our love of the Lord can be manifested in the nurturing of the people of God? And is it not possible for us to point out to the disillusioned, to those disappointed in faith, to those who are about to forego the whole mission because of their disappointment that nothing is happening — is it not right for us to say to them as they near the back door, "Do not leave. It is true that waiting is not the most exciting thing in the world. We understand how you want to be excited and titillated by an endless round of activities, by visible signs of success, by being assured always that the Lord is present. But we cannot assure you of this. It is not ours to provide. However, you have been around for a while. You have seen the ebb and flow, the high and low tides of the faith, and you have lived through them before. Turn around. There are some lambs back inside. There are some sheep. They need your tending and your care. They need to be nurtured and fed by you. And perhaps in so doing, you will be renewed within yourself." How did Jesus say this to Peter? In some

such words as these: "When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." Then he said, "Follow me."

This is surely, among other things perhaps, a word that we may use to those who have heard too often how the church needs constantly to catch the young in its nets. And when the elders hear these words and no more, they may be disillusioned, wondering if there is anything left for them in the church, as they begin to make their way to exits. Wait a minute, old folks. I am one of you, and I know that there are little lambs to be fed and young sheep to be led, and others for whom to care and to tend. And the very fact that someone has some age on us means that we know that we cannot simply go anywhere we wish. There is not enough time for that. So let us stay and do what Christ has appointed for us.

Elijah and Simon Peter do not make up the entire story. People leave the church these days for every reason under the sun. Let us begin with students, away from the restraints of home, trying to become independent and thinking that this means the discard of all they have experienced before. Some of them will claim a newfound sophistication, the need to think for themselves. But, at least, someone needs to take a towel to the back of the ears of some. At best, someone needs to know that adolescent rebellion is against father and mother — thus an adolescent rebellion against God the Father and the church, bride of Christ and mother of his people. Some will say that the church lacks warmth; they need a warm embrace. Others will say that science has convinced them that religion is superstition; they need to be asked what science is doing about the threat of nuclear war. Some will say that power is in politics and they need something stronger than the church to achieve social righteousness; they need to be reminded that politicizing the gospel implies that social righteousness may be determined by popular vote. Then the sinner, so sure that one has broken the rules of righteousness to the degree of being irrecoverable, can be found slipping out and needs to hear that there is no sin which can defy the powerful law, the cross. Others will be angry, sad, or lonely, but in whatever event they must not slip away without redemptive notice and concern.

Therefore, wait just a minute, woman, man, adolescent, youngster. Where do you think you are going? Do you intend to spend the rest of your lives in a cave polishing your prejudices and fondling your fears? We are among that seven thousand who have not bowed to any false God, who have not made our idols from the stuff of Washington and Wall Street, and we do not intend to. Endure with us to the end.

Do you intend to spend the rest of your lives fishing for fish that keep managing to elude your net? There are sheep to feed and to find. And the colder the night, the greater the need. Endure with us to the end.

Those who endure to the end shall be saved and God will call them blessed. Amen.

# A Theology for Ethics

*April, 1965*

*Matthew 26:6-13*

What on earth is the church supposed to do? Granted that every church is comprised of sinners saved by grace. Granted that Christians seldom, if ever, do the best that they can. Granted if we knew what to do — those of us here — we would find many reasons for evading the responsibility therein implied. Despite this and all else, what on earth is the church going to do if it does not find out what on earth it is supposed to do?

There is enough wrong in the world for the church to do something. Whether it be the breakdown of social morality, the escalating war in Vietnam, the quality of family life, the specter of poverty in Appalachia, continuing unemployment in an automated world, concrete jungles of urbanization and the depersonalization of its humans, or the secular binge of academe, one thing is certain: there is much to be done.

This is the point exactly. The church does not know what to do when there is so much to be done. By *church*, in this context, I refer not only to the institution but to Christians in a more personal and individual sense. It does not appear that Christians know what on earth to do as Christians, whether they are acting self-consciously as part of the church or not. I am more impressionistic than statistical at this point. But since this sermon began to demand expression, I have been asking other Christians and myself such a question. Generally speaking, the inquiry has left the answerers somewhat stunned, as if we had been hit on the head with the heavy end of a question mark.

We are not unlike that day-laborer surplus which gathers at an

abandoned service station in town, so the newspapers tell us, waiting half hopefully for someone to come by and offer a job. Since they are unskilled and so are we, we can be but tentatively hopeful because we are not sure that we can do the job that is suggested. It is an exceedingly busy world in which Christians as Christians and churches as churches have time on their hands, although they are busy beyond calculation as persons not necessarily Christian and as institutions other than churches. So we are faced with the possibility that in a world where there is so much to do, we are popcorn-consuming spectators wondering how the game is going to come out, and only occasionally do we rally to "lift a cheer" for our side.

Let us make sure that, in response to this kind of criticism, we do not make use of a catchall answer such as that of the great commission in Matthew's gospel. The church often loses itself in such generalities, while ignoring all things specific, until it finds that the generality is beyond its achievement.

It is a safe conjecture that we no longer have much to do in the world, because we have not been doing much in particular in recent years. Caught up as it was in the American way of life, the church failed to address with prophetic particularity the two most pressing issues of recent American history. The labor movement in America found little or no support from the Protestant churches. In more recent times the liberation of the Negro was not, and has not, been greatly affected by the church's ministry.

The raw irony of these situations is devastating. The church was but remotely and reluctantly involved in each. At the same time, this was the only involvement it had. It could preach to a cause in which it was not sacrificially concerned but which constituted about the only cause it had. Now labor and social legislation have marked out an inevitable path with regards to labor and the Negro in our country. Thus these two movements are removed from what was always but little more than conversation for the churches. In other words, the trend indicates that the church is even losing a great deal of what there once was to talk about.

Insisting that this is the major cause of the church's inaction on all such issues is, however, a glaring oversimplification. A survey of comparatively recent church history can add considerably to understanding and insight.

If we go back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is possible to pick up a religious attitude which is generally called pietism. This emphasized a deep personal and individualistic religious experience which its converts sought to lock up within their own introverted lives. They thought little and cared less about the problems of man and the world in general. As they withdrew from society, they were content with a salvation by which they sought to assure their inner holiness and to remain unspotted from the world.

In reaction to this other-wordly pietism came the event of the social gospel, which flourished greatly in the nineteenth century. Despite the endeavors of such men as Walter Rauschenbusch, the social gospel never achieved a system of doctrinal thought that could give it substance or enduring form. As Sidney Mead observes in *The Lively Experiment*, "There was assurance and comfort to be found in the thought that perhaps the Christian could not go too far astray when feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and giving the cup of cold water for Christ's sake. Perhaps it was never formulated in just the same fashion, but one profound appeal of the social-gospel movement was that it made possible for many idealistic Americans continued belief in Christianity if only 'for the world's sake.' No doubt what many nominally Christian people really came to believe in was the work of social betterment and renovation."

Another reaction began to appear in the later nineteenth century and has persisted for one hundred years. It took on the personal guise of the fundamentalist. I believe that some of us have wasted too much time and effort poking jibes at fundamentalism when we ought to be in some kind of dialogue with the world. But this much needs, at least, to be said. The fundamentalist stands as a classic and miserable failure in terms of what he started out to do and be. He offered the religious world great promise because he was going to recover a theological system of faith and practice. Quite accurately, he understood that the social gospel was bound to perish because it had no real theology and would dribble off into humanism and faith in good works. Instead of accomplishing this, the fundamentalist capitulated to the charms of pragmatism. He endorsed what seemed to work. Shortly after his first appearance, he became

nontheological and began to play the political power game in which he sought to gain control of denominational hierarchies, theological seminaries, and church-related colleges and universities. He is still at this business, and his success is one of tragic proportions.

We are still impoverished because the fundamentalist did not persist in his reason for existence. Thus we are left without the old fervor of the exponents of the social gospel, and instead of recovering a theology, we have learned how to live only with power structure.

The way out of this impasse seems to be in the direction of recovering a social passion and ethical concern while filling the theological void left by the abortive, fundamentalist attempt. If this void is to be filled, one of the first requirements is a theological ethic to establish a point of departure with reference to the kingdom of God on earth.

Carlyle Marney in his *Recovery of the Person* puts his finger on the misdirection of the liberal humanism and social gospel of the nineteenth century. It tried to have a Son without a Father — a Christ without God. "In overcoming moralistic pietism," Marney argues, "the nineteenth century liberal went too far. The Christ of their teachings had no Father . . . How could one speak of the Son who had no Father?" Furthermore, that gospel which emphasizes the kingdom of God must have an "alpha" as well as an "omega" — a beginning as well as an end. "They were speaking truly when they said the kingdom is the supreme end, they did not know it as a point of departure." Man must never believe that he brings in the kingdom by his own social and ethical endeavor.

This view is assuredly implicit in Matthew 25 and 26. Much has been made of the unconscious element in the good works of the blessed in the parable of the judgment. Those who were doing good were not conscious that this was a ministry for Christ himself. Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.

Reading this idea in the light of Matthew 26, one gets a different view than were Matthew 25 read alone. For in the text of the morning, a woman who poured some very expensive ointment on the head of Christ is commended by him in the face of the critical disciples, who thought that the ointment should have been sold

and the proceeds given to the poor. Christ is speaking, almost radically to be sure, of adoration for the Son of God as an element not to be forgotten in our ethical concerns. What is done ethically must be done in terms of worship and praise for God.

Even the parable of the judgment lends itself to this kind of interpretation. For the doers of good were called the blessed who inherited the kingdom before the foundation of the world. Their good works did not bring to being the kingdom. They were claiming their inheritance in a kingdom prepared before the world began and ushered in by Jesus Christ in whom God was reconciling the world. A kingdom given in Christ rather than built by man is the essence of a theological ethic.

The ethical church and Christians generally must also determine that they shall be judged by God alone. If this sounds somewhat arrogant, let it stand nevertheless. For the impotence of the Christian community in our day rests, in at least one respect, in its thoroughgoing Americanism. It worries incessantly about its image in the world. What foreigner is not exhausted by the question on every hand: What do you think of America and Americans? Also, like America, the American church in trying to be self-critical manages only to be self-conscious and introverted.

Rather than being judged by the world or one another, we must become the judge of the world. "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself judged by no one."

The church cannot afford to become so busy with itself and its image that it becomes irrelevant and powerless. Parenthetically, Russell Brantley said this beautifully not long ago in speaking about the image of Wake Forest College. Unless the church is willing to judge the world and then act redemptively in it, it is so out of character that it really has nothing to do.

The reference to judgment brings us to the question of the church's salvation. Ethically considered, the church's concern for its own salvation is suspect on two counts. First of all the church cannot save itself. The church is created by God. It will be saved by God alone. And it will be saved as an instrument. It is designed to

save the world. God's redemptive love is for the world, and he loves the church because it is a faithful instrument. The son was given for the world, not for us and the church.

Finally, the church must be mindful of the grace of God. This does not only mean that we are forgiven of our sins but also that we carry treasure in earthen vessels and that God can and does use us in our imperfection.

Because the church is in the world it must become all things to men in order to save some. But this kind of flexibility and permissives is corrected by what Paul also said: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us."

The church is always theological if it tries to do something, however imperfect and incomplete. Pietism, the social gospel, and fundamentalism at least served to show themselves as earthen vessels through which the power of God is made evident. In the last analysis the church becomes what it does, more than what it contemplates. It knows itself and is known by others in terms of its action. Where it stands is less significant than where it moves. The church should have the courage of imperfection, plunging into the realities of our time, and knowing that not only its worst but also its best efforts are still redeemed in a God who loves us beyond our deserving.

# Christ Undeviating

*April 4, 1981*

*Matthew 16:11-28; II Thessalonians 2:16-3:5*

If Peter had prevailed, had gotten his way with Jesus that day at Caesarea Philippi, chances are that we would never have read of “the steadfastness of Christ” in the Bible. As a matter of fact, it remains anything but a household phrase in the scriptures. If one’s loyalties bind the reader to the splendidly wrought King James Version — which, by the way, is now being disparaged by the inerrantists, of all people, as the poisoned product of a bunch of Anglicans — a “steadfast Christ” will not be portrayed in so many words. Among the options, “the steadfastness of Christ” is found in the Revised Version and The New English Bible. Other translations tell of his patience, his suffering, and his patient waiting.

Despite the phrase’s infrequent appearance in scriptures, it surely belongs, as a word at the right time and in the right place, to Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians. The faithful of the church were being ridiculed and abused by their countrymen, and there was internal dissension due, in part, to the growing number of idlers in the membership. As a result, Paul directed the hearts of the faithful people to God’s love and Christ’s steadfastness. It is no undue strain upon the imagination to conjecture that the Savior’s refusal to be deterred from going to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die and be raised, may have prompted Paul to remind the Thessalonians of the “steadfastness of Christ.”

The story of Peter’s dispute with Jesus is as familiar as breakfast cereal and generally leaves us with no better taste. Hard on the heels of Peter’s confession that he was Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus revealed that he was going to Jerusalem to proclaim the

kingdom of God. Peter was quick to censure the Lord, even to the point of rebuking him, only to hear Jesus retort, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of man." Then the Savior set his face to go to Jerusalem *for our salvation*.

Count with me now, if you will, the number of sometimes formidable, and nearly always convincing, reasons that Jesus could have used for aborting the Jerusalem trip. No person, having started on the road to an appointed destination, has been forced to refuse and plow through as many diverting encumberances as Jesus had to on the way to the cross. He had to take his first step much against the opinions of Peter, whom he had just made "chief of staff," had just called the "rock" on which the church was to build. But the disciple quickly became a stone over which to stumble rather than a sturdy slab on which to build. Jesus had to go to Jerusalem with Simon Peter and the other disciples on a tow line.

A few of us know the trials of going it alone to our appointed places of proclaiming the kingdom of God. My home church barely squeaked out a call to the ministry, and my father offered a bribe big enough to make me nearly choke on "Here I am. Send me." He gladly and proudly withdrew his offer long before his death, but I have not even heard a squeak from my boyhood church across the years.

The majority of us, although not of the clergy, have also known the pain of having to go alone to Jerusalem. You have had to set your face to go when it meant looking through and around dear and beseeching faces insisting that this was not your thing, saying that you ought to change your mind. But, for all that, most of us were not walking to a cross with the same dreadful certainty that Jesus knew on his way to Jerusalem. If we know how difficult it is to walk alone, think how much more difficult it must have been for Jesus to ignore the advice which might have meant life rather than death. But he went on his way *for our salvation*.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem's outskirts — it being a city yet modest enough to try to cover its inner sin with some exterior clothing — he faced a second diversion different in nature but equally as compelling as the first. Applause and pomp filled the air. The Savior's path was strewn with palm leaves, which were acco-

lades not designed to be walked over but to slow the pace until one could hear the echoing repetitions of praise and adulation. He had faced a similar temptation on the mountain of his transfiguration. Peter had not been one easily dissuaded. Along with James and John, this impetuous man had hoped to persuade Jesus to abide on the mountain and thus keep him out of Jerusalem. Perhaps Christ had assumed that once he came down from the mountain, there would be no more ploys, with praise as their powers of persuasion, to keep him from his meeting with the will of God. It was not to be. In Jerusalem's suburbs hosannas filled his ears, as they hovered in the air like panoplies of praise. But it was soon apparent that the people were applauding Jesus for what they wanted him to be, wished he were, rather than for what he intended to be and do. Accolades are like that. Applause is often an activity of self-interest, a lobbyist promoting its own cause. All of this must have made Jesus wonder if he were making the right choice. Would it not have been plausible for him to have stayed with those people, so convinced of his importance and power, and ministered to them with a life of dedication. He did not stay. He pushed on into the city *for our salvation.*

He came soon to the temple. It was much in need of reform. The practice of the money-changers left a lot to be desired. The people were taking shortcuts through the sacred precincts as if they were trying to take the easiest and shortest path to righteousness and redemption. To be sure, reforming the temple would have taken more than an hour or so, a day or so, a month, or even a year or so; it would have taken decades. Was it now, however, a cause worthy of all the time that would be needed? Bringing the issue to our contemporary setting, is there anything of greater urgency than reforming and perfecting the church? Is this not what Christians should be doing for most of their waking hours? When I am trying to win a convert, nothing stings more than the retort that if the church were as faithful as it claims, it would be so much easier to believe the gospel it preaches. I am sure that you have heard a similar rebuff more than once. As for me, whenever I feel the slap of some such accusation, I hurry back to the church determined to purify it no matter what it will take in energy and time. It was not this way with Jesus. Leaving the temple in a mess, he went on his

way, testifying by his actions that the kingdom of God would come not by means of a pure temple, but by the power of his crucifixion. He made that choice *for our salvation*.

During that week of his passion in Jerusalem, Jesus also had to deal with political questions. He was asked about the legality, under Jewish law, of paying taxes to Caesar. Our tendency to read more into his answer than is probably justified indicates how much we rely on political solutions.

His questioners may have had similar predispositions, even then, and Jesus may have taken them into account when he replied to their query. This could have been the reason for his nearly curt, flippant, and understated response. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," said Jesus without elaboration and almost as if speaking over his shoulder as he hurried to Calvary *for our salvation*.

Christ was also confronted with the plight of the poor presenting itself as one of the darkest hues in the shadow of the cross. Came that woman into Simon's house, where Jesus was probably dining on one of Martha's famous meals, to anoint him with costly oil. The disciples grumbled, "Why this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor." "Why this waste?" they asked, because, like the rest of us, they placed more importance upon feeding the immediate needs of the poor than upon death for the eventual redemption of the world. Knowing the truth that no one cared or would care for the poor more than he, Christ must have given thought to dealing with the problems of poverty and want before permitting himself to be crucified. But he refused to be deterred. "The poor you have with you always," he explained, keeping his face set steadfastly on the cross *for our salvation*.

Throughout those final and dreadful days, there was yet another diversion with which our Lord was forced to deal. It had to do with Jesus as a master teacher. We can only surmise how many lessons and parables Jesus taught during the last week of his life. We may be reasonably sure that his prophetic assignation of woes for the religious leaders took place at this time. There are also the rich and telling parables of the wedding garment, the ten maidens, the talents, and the last judgment. The nature of the second coming was described. Multitudes gathered to hear his words as he estab-

lished himself as one of the truly great teachers of his time. This congregation is likely to appreciate Jesus's temptation to postpone the crucifixion in order to live in Jerusalem as an incomparable "professor." Indeed, we would be prone to wonder, more than others, why Jesus did not decide to set aside the cross for the sake of knowledge. But Jesus did not linger long enough to give final exams; he was crucified *for our salvation*.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul used the steadfastness of Christ as an example by which those beleaguered people might fashion their own fidelity. It was a good lesson for them. It is a good lesson for us. Firmly being who we are, resolutely doing what we should, and stubbornly sticking to our commitments make for important qualities in our lives. Satisfaction, a sense of well-being and accomplishment seldom come short of keeping our pledges of being dependable, of achieving what we propose, of reaching destinations, of being in and on time, and of being faithful members of Christ's body according to our baptismal vows. Steadfastness has much to do with the shape and stuff of our lives.

Even so, it is not our steadfastness which really or ultimately matters. The fact that we are does not guarantee that any of us will go all the way with Jesus to the cross; most of us will not. His best friends, the disciples who have witnessed to us about him, were hardly steadfast in that respect. Here is the point. We do not have to make it all the way. What really matters is that, even if we do not, *he did — for our salvation*.



# Easter's Glad Irony

April 11, 1982

*Mark 16; I Corinthians 15:12-50*

"Pity the God who has no better defense than the church," is what William Willimon has recently had to say with his considerable talents for words. As Willimon sees the church, especially during Lent, it is a church which has to wait, and while waiting must be honest about the human situation — one of evil injustice, unfulfilled hope, and unanswered questions — a church which has to be tentative in hope, resting on faith as a now-but-not-yet business, and one which is forever confronted by sad faces which do not reflect the joy of salvation or deliverance. Willimon agrees with Woody Allen, "It's not that God is cruel; it's just that God is an underachiever." And if his estimate is true of both God and the church, then this underachieving God is to be pitied if he has no better defense than the church.

Since it is Easter Sunday, and Easter Sunday is not the day for prolonged debate, I do not wish to argue the case with Willimon one way or another. Let us even suppose that he is right on both counts, that an underachiever God is matched by an underachiever church. Then we might see what is meant by my use of the title "Easter's Glad Irony," because with respect to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has left so much up to the church. I do not mean that the truth of the resurrection rests upon the church, but the telling of it does. It was that way from the beginning: only believers saw the empty tomb, only believers began to tell the story of a risen Lord, only believers testified of the appearances of a risen Christ in their midst. And although Paul was not a believer when first encountering the risen Lord, he became a believer and had more to

do with the founding of the Christian church than any other than Christ himself. Paul was made an exception for the sake of the Gentiles.

So much of the Judeo-Christian story has something more substantial in its support than does the resurrection. The most of its events have left some tracks in history. There were floods in what might be conceived as Noah's time; there were migrations out of Egypt into the Promised Land; there was a Decaloguge to which the Jews were committed; Jesus was born among some questions as to whether or not Joseph was his father; Jesus was crucified as an event in history. One does not have to be a Christian to accept the reality of these matters in one way or another. But the resurrection has not been photographed for history because it did not occur in history in any way to make an imprint upon it, unless one wishes to get enshrouded in the shroud debate. The only manifestation of the resurrection of substance (by that I mean something that sits on the ground and has visibility and shape) is the church, and the only ones there are to tell about the resurrection now have heard it from someone else who had heard it from someone else, until it is traced back to those who saw an empty tomb and a risen Lord in forms which they did not quite comprehend. Paul was somewhat of an exception, but aside from him whether then or now those people who claim to have experienced the risen Lord are people who believe that Lord is risen because of what they have heard from witnesses.

Of all the essential truths of Christianity, the resurrection is probably the most central, and it more than any other truthful event depends upon the testimony of the church made up of people like you and me. In other words, the world and the church live with the possibility that the resurrection is nothing more than a rumor. If so, the church has embellished its hearsay through the years and has literally dared the world to deny its witness to the resurrection. It is rather conclusively the church's business.

Mark's gospel may be correct in indicating that the church did not start out with great eagerness to talk about the resurrection. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the grave after the Sabbath was past and were amazed to see the stone rolled away. A young man dressed in white told them not to be amazed, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has

risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him." The young man or angel may or may not, the scholars cast some doubt here, told the women to tell the disciples and Peter that the risen Christ may be found in Galilee. In any event the women were amazed, trembling with astonishment, and Mark tells us that they did not speak to anyone about a risen Christ, "for they were afraid."

Other gospels handle the story in different ways but I suspect that Mark's gospel is not far afield in suggesting that the initial response of the people of Christ to his resurrection was indeed one of fear. If the account is at all trustworthy, these women were not afraid of the threat of grave robbers, nor of the authorities who might not want such a tale spread abroad, nor even were they afraid of being ridiculed for having come up with such a story. The word Mark uses to describe their fear is the one that Luke uses in telling of the fear of the shepherds upon hearing the angel tell of the birth of the child, Christ the Lord. Their fear was made of reverence and awe, of some sense of the holy which they did not understand, and they were afraid to speak of it.

So much of this is true of even yet. If we fear to speak of the resurrection of Christ, how much more frightened are we to speak of resurrection for people like ourselves and indeed to speak of resurrection of ourselves. We do some very fine things when people die. One of the finest things we do is take food into the home of the deceased — food which is not only the substance of life but, in this circumstance, a telling symbol of life. And often we take the food and set it down on the kitchen counter and slip away without so much as a word because we are afraid that we do not know what to say or do in a most proper sense. I find no cause to be critical of this to an extreme degree. Resurrection is not to be spoken of lightly or in jest, and we are therefore reluctant to do so, and we who are believers have also come to realize that if resurrection cannot or is not spoken of at the time of death, the rest of what there is to say is hardly worth the trouble.

Although Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written before Mark's gospel was set down, the apostle's treatment of the resurrection represents a later development than what was true of these first believers rushing away in consternation and dread from the open tomb. Although Paul encountered the risen Lord while still an unbeliever, a matter probably never duplicated before or since, it

must be remembered that he had heard the testimony of a risen Lord many times before from the Christians he was engaged in persecuting. A resurrected Christ was no stranger to Paul when he met him and was much less a strange idea. This is evidenced by the fact that much which Paul had to say about the resurrection was said out of the traditional accounts and interpretations that he had heard from others. But by this time Paul as spokesman for the church — and having along with others experienced a risen presence of Christ, and knowing of the body-soul dualism, by which the Corinthians, affecting the mind of the Greeks, could believe in life after death by believing in the immortality of the soul — was ready to shock the world with an affirmation of the resurrection of the body.

We may be sure that what was true then is not only less true today. People do not mind embracing some concept of the immortality of the soul, where the soul loses itself in the oversoul which hovers above, a kind of absorbent overblob that obscures all separate identities, but what the world has never been able to take with either ease or grace is the concept of the resurrection of the body. Paul further confused the issue, then and now, by suggesting that flesh and blood could not inherit the kingdom of God, even while he was speaking of the resurrection of the body as the only sensible basis for belief in eternal life, only to explain the whole of his position by insisting that the resurrection body is a spiritual body, not a physical body such as the one that is buried.

One of the reasons that Christians cannot give clear answers to the world about the details and nature of the resurrected Christ or of what we mean by resurrected body is that the New Testament is almost as confusing to the believers as to the outsiders. With the resurrection we are forced to express the truth about Easter, as Ronald Goetz has put it, which "is more true than any of our explanations."

But the church has dared wonderfully not to hide behind the alibi that you cannot understand the resurrection without experiencing it, without believing in it. Instead of hiding so the church, mostly because of Paul, has attempted to contend for the resurrection in the form of intellectual respectability. Paul's argument for a spiritual body in place of a physical body is no more far-fetched than the idea that the soul somehow has a life apart from the body,

which is maintained throughout this life somewhat is a prisoner of the flesh, and then at death is released to soar in the heavens.

Even in the midst of our intellectualizing about the resurrection, if asked what is meant by the resurrection of the body, how may it come to pass, and what is the nature of the risen body in heaven, we face our questioner with crinkled eyes and sheepish grin. And are forced often to confess that we do not know exactly what we mean, that we have no idea about how it is in heaven, but that we have learned this from the tradition, it is something that we have always heard, and we are still examining it, explaining it while we believe it, and because we believe it we know it to be true.

So you see what we are doing to the world; we are intellectualizing about a truth which can neither be verified nor disputed. We have for so long a time been making sensible and rational sounds about the resurrection all the while we are saying that it is a supra-rational and supra-historical and supra-natural event. We will argue with the disbelievers, the cynics, the agnostics, atheists, logical positivists, and whatever into the wee hours of the night, presenting some logical weapons in our behalf which they are forced to take seriously, but if and when they finally overwhelm us with their own logic, and we are getting the worst of the debate, we leave no doubt in their minds that we are going to believe in a risen Lord, experience a risen Lord, wait for the return of a risen Lord, would be disappointed if the shroud proved anything — despite all the logic and failed explanations in the world. And mind you this, when the discussions take this turn of events, the logicians are the ones who come close to losing their cool, even sometimes to the point of making sarcastic remarks that they wish they could learn how to be as big fools as we are. And do you know what? Even when their sarcasm drips with the acid of innuendo and the barbs of insinuation, they appear to mean what they say. They too would like to be fools for Christ's sake.

One is forced to engage in mischievous play with the world when testifying to the risen Lord. We pray that it is not harmful and we must make sure that it is not malicious. But we act as if we are willing to engage the rational world in argumentation about the resurrection on its own terms, those of logic and rationality and whatever else. But then when we prove to be no match for the

world on its own rational terms, we change the rules of the game and talk about the foolishness of God being wiser than men and admit that we are engaged in folly and that which causes people to stumble because we are actually being fools for Christ's sake.

What we are doing all the while is trying to get the world to bend its ear to the music of the Easter dance, to the bell-like sounds of the Easter morn, hoping all the while that some whom we have so engaged will be caught up with us when we change the rules of the dialogue, thus causing them to stumble — but, to stumble into faith. But it is more than mischief. Assured Christians need to remember that perhaps the finest believing that is going on is with those for whom faith is an enormous struggle of the intellect.

The point is that there we are today, each in his or her own way making testimony to the risen Lord, some able to do so with great simplicity, others with impossibly difficult complications, but all of us knowing that Christ does not lie buried back there in Joseph's tomb. If we believed that, we would not be here. And as long as we are here, the world does have a glad irony on its hands. And next Sunday, after the to-do has subsided, the irony will only be that much greater.

# The Third Day and The Last Day

April 1, 1972

*Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31; I Corinthians 15:51:58*

When we say "I doubt that" or "I wonder about that," we usually mean the same thing. What holds true for our common language does not obtain in the biblical language. *Doubt* and *wonder* are miles apart so far as scripture is concerned. *Doubt* means to judge diversely, to stand divided, or to be without resources in its biblical setting. *Wonder* indicates astonishment — a state of being startled by marvelous events.

In the light of that distinction, a Christian should celebrate Easter Sunday by dealing with wonder more than dealing with doubt. Easter worship is a matter of proving nothing but celebrating much in terms of wonder and adoration.

We are well served by the frequent reminder that knowledge or certainty is not the opposite of doubt. The opposite of doubt is faith. To take the position that we do not doubt the resurrection of Jesus Christ does not mean that we know it for certain, down to the final and most minute detail. The resurrection does not add to our doubt because we have faith. It adds to our wonder because it is almost too marvelous to behold.

Perhaps this explains why over half the times that *wonder* appears in the Old Testament, it is accompanied by signs which give testimony to its reality. In the New Testament, *wonder* never occurs without the support of signs. In all cases, however, these signs do not eliminate the need for ventures of faith. It is faith, not the signs, which deal effectively with doubt. All of the signs are so ambiguous as to point to the event of power but in such a way as to make us wonder all the more.

We are not gathered for the purpose of proving the resurrection to anyone — not to ourselves, not even to the skeptic. We are simply here to celebrate its wonder and its truth. This does not mean that Easter is not a great day for doubters to be at church. The worship of the church will not do much to drive away their doubts. But if the faithful are celebrating Easter as they should be, most any doubter — even if he should think that he is in the company of fools — will probably wish that he could become a fool in his own right.

After all, if Christ is not risen, there is no place for us to go and try to prove to ourselves that he is. When the church sets itself to prove that Christ is risen, it serves only to discredit itself. As Paul put it, "... if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." A church cannot prove the resurrection after the fact. Had there been no resurrection there would be no church.

Herin lies an introductory clue for the first cause of our celebration. Paul says twice within a short span: "... if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised." "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised." These are words of wonder which startle me almost out of my boots. The resurrection of us, the likes of you and me, was already promised before Christ died and was raised from the dead. His resurrection did not introduce the concept or the event to man; it was the guarantee of what had already been promised to man. Since he had taken upon himself our humanity, then if resurrection were not a possibility for us, it could not be a possibility for him. So much does God love us that, if we cannot be raised from the dead, neither can his beloved Son be raised from the dead. Now this surely cannot mean that the resurrection of Christ is dependent upon the resurrection of man. The concept does not point to the dependency and powerlessness of Christ but to the love of God. God will not give to His only Son the exclusive gift of resurrection. Indeed if we are not to be raised, then we may be sure that Christ has not been raised. The wonder of resurrection is that, instead of our resurrection proceeding from and after the waking of Christ, his resurrection is in the light of the promise given to every man.

One can do more than conjecture at the faithlessness of the disciples after the crucifixion. In this wise, I am coming more to grounding that faithlessness not so much in the fact that the disci-

ples could not accept the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus Christ but that they could not believe in the possibility of their own resurrection. Christ could not arise from the dead because the dead could not be raised.

This explains why the entire mission dissolved immediately after the crucifixion. Not only did the disciples believe that Christ was dead. They were quite certain that they were dead to all intents and purposes. Had they thought otherwise, they would have logically and quickly gathered themselves to plan how they would carry on the mission. They would have elected a new leader and assigned specific tasks to specific people.

The record shows that this was farthest from their minds. Not only were they cowering in fear in their hiding rooms, but John's gospel implies that they were about to break up the group. Simon Peter was ready to go back to the fishing trade — fishing for fish again — and six other disciples were ready to go with him. Even old Thomas was up for that. Along with the rest, he had already seen the risen Lord and in a very special way. But you see, these men were confronting their own death, their own aborted mission in the world, and they were going back to that lifelessness of before — the time before they were called to be fishers of men. And Thomas went along, although he was not mentioned as a fisherman when the story began. I attach no great importance to that; I am just curious.

But the facts are that Jesus had to come through shut doors to get at them with the truth that, because he was alive, they were also alive. And today we celebrate our own resurrection as well as the resurrection of the Lord, if we are to celebrate at all. Paul said of us that the whole creation waits to come alive at the redemption of this body, which is the church. By this we know that Christ has been raised from the dead because His body is here. But we are not here to prove anything. We are here to live because we are alive.

Now, let it be understood that our celebration is only partial. It is not yet complete. That is yet to be. So alive as we are, we wait for his coming again in order for all things to be secure and for the mystery to be completely unfolded. One need only to look at the word and the church in order to note how ridiculous the church appears, if it acts like a complete celebration is in order. Karl Barth warned the

church never to forget that it was still on the march, on the way but not yet fully arrived at home. "It is not content," he said once of the church, "to be like the virgins at the marriage feast, but obviously behaves as if the 'cause of God' were in its own hands. Instead of bearing witness to the authority of Jesus, it invests itself with His authority attributing absolute perfection to its order and ministry and cultus and dogma, and interpreting historical evolution as the automatic development of the divine truth incarnate in itself. Thus at each successive stage of its development, it acts and speaks as if it were permitted and commanded to blow the last trumpet now."

It has already been said that the signs accompanying the wonder are ambiguous. This is especially true with the resurrection wonder. It is noteworthy, for example, that all the signs steer clear of pointing directly to the resurrection event, to its nature, or to how it occurred. The evidence of the signs is the mind-boggling empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus, bodily formed, recognizable, but not at once.

When he purports to answer the question, How are the dead raised? Paul contents himself with a description of the resurrection body. He tells the difference between the body that dies and the body that is raised.

The Bible affords little or no description of the life which has put on immortality in the resurrection. With the exception of some highly speculative figurations, most of the New Testament does not address itself to the nature of the afterlife. Revelation tells of the absence of night, tears, and church in the new Jerusalem coming from heaven. But for all its esoteric daring, Revelation stays clear of detailing the nature and scope of life after death.

Far more frequent and characteristic are verses suggesting that the resurrection of life is yet hidden from us. So the Colossian letter can read "For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God." That surely alludes to our life in resurrection. It goes on to say, "When Christ who is our life appears, you also will appear with him in glory." That is surely what is yet to be revealed on the last day, the day of glory and triumph. I John echoes the same theme in the hauntingly beautiful promise: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is."



Red House  
Baptist Church, Richmond,  
Kentucky, 1939-1941



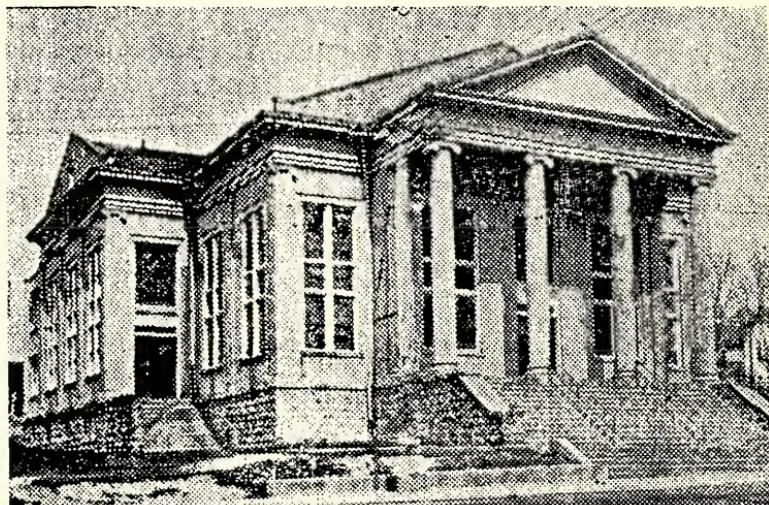
First Baptist Church Coeburn, Virginia, 1941-1943

# First Baptist Church

PRINCETON, W. VA.

1120 MERCER STREET

PHONE 314-L



MINISTER  
WARREN T. CARR

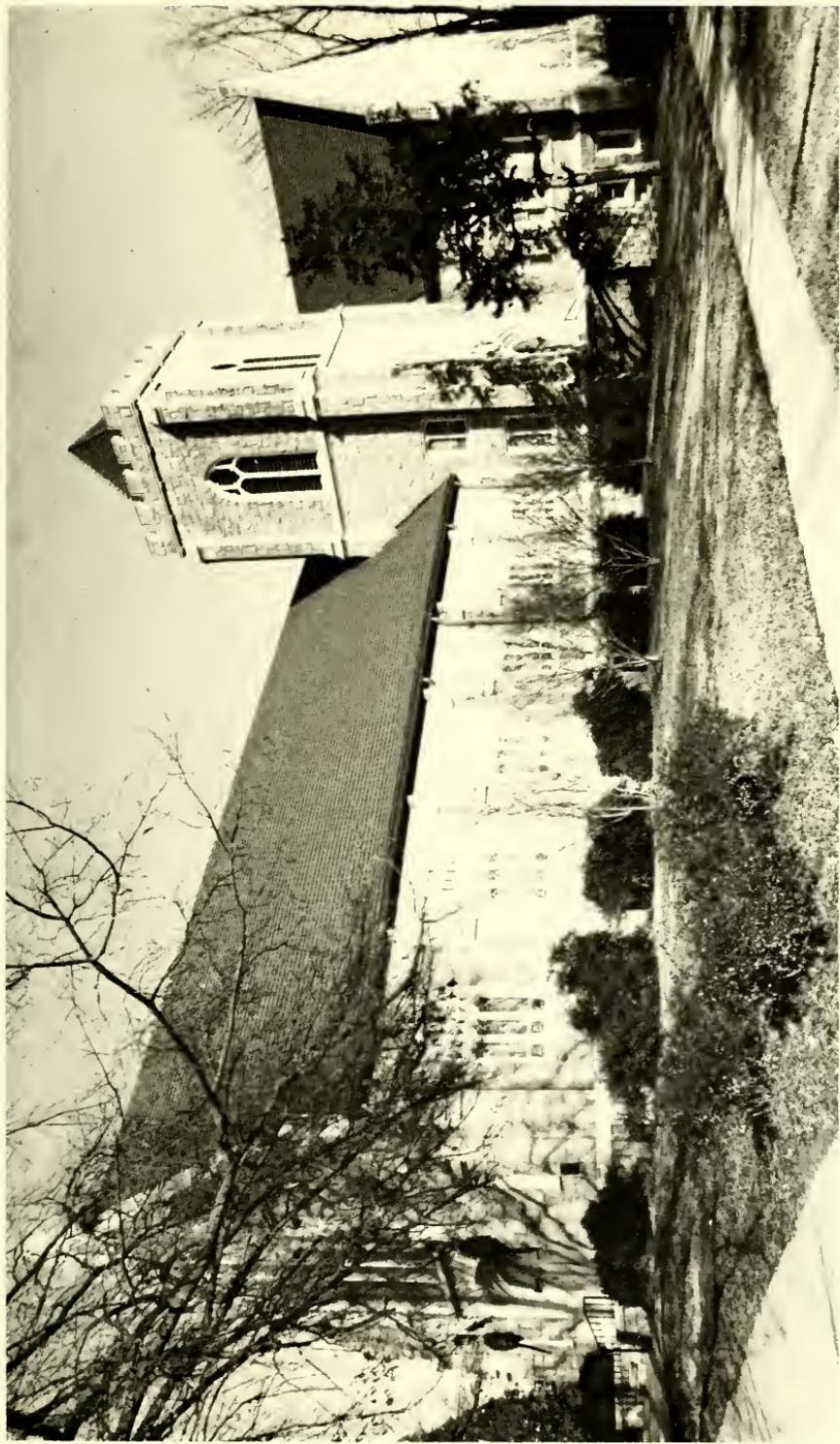
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CHAPEL MINISTER  
CLAYTON D. SWEET

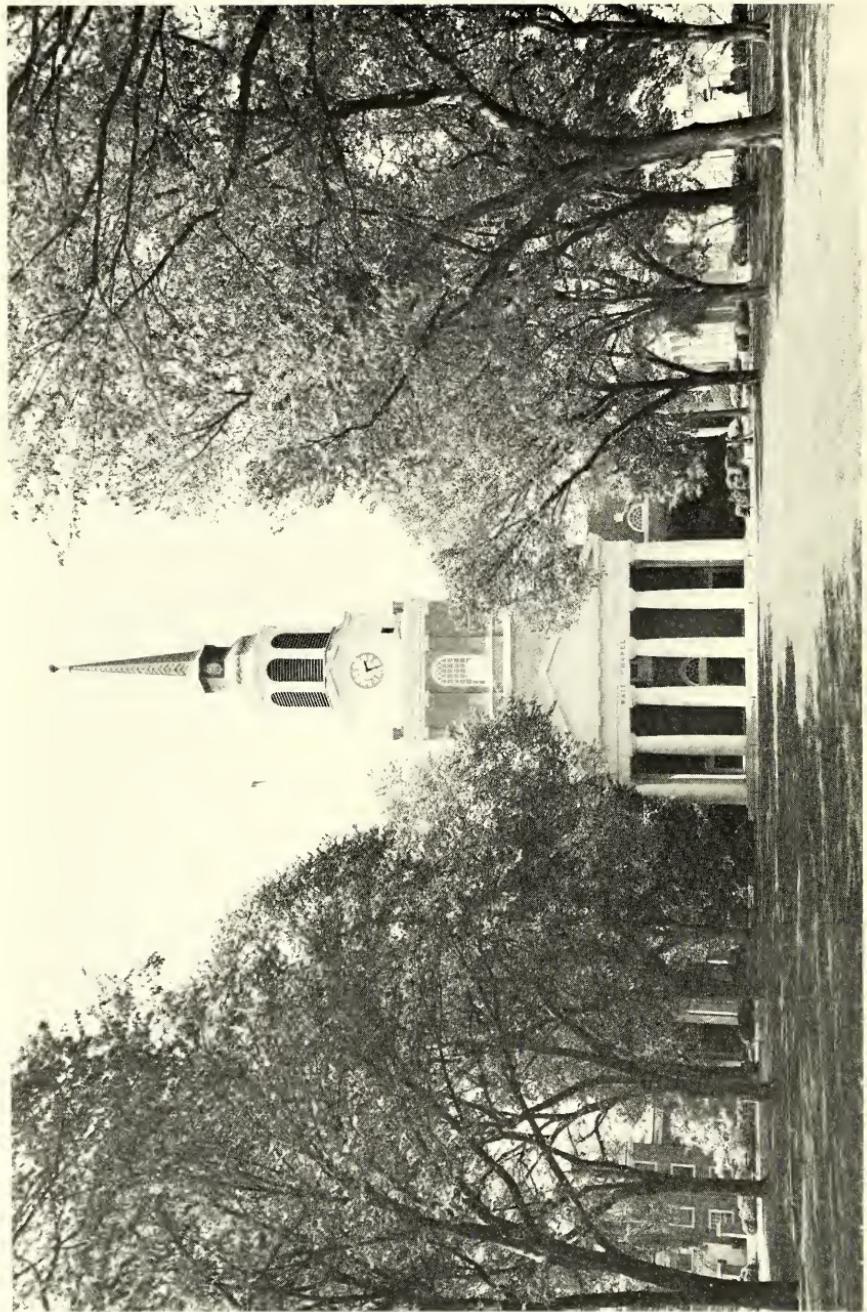
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*The Church With A Purpose*

A Bulletin while Warren was Pastor at the  
First Baptist Church, Princeton, West Virginia, 1943-1946



Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina, 1946-1964



The Wake Forest Baptist Church Worships in Wait Chapel, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1964-1985



Warren's Portrait by Anne Kesler Shields



Warren and Martha



Warren as a Letterman at  
Transylvania College



Warren and Dick Howerton  
at Southern Seminary



Warren Courting Martha



Wedding Picture  
of Warren  
and Martha



The Carr Family

All of this suggests that we are waiting for the final celebration. "God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." The mystery will be unfolded on that day when the Lord comes with trailing clouds of glory to vindicate the life he lived and died and was raised. And our resurrection points to that event. We then will be up and around for the last big party. And we ought to have enough oil in our lamps to keep the party going so that night does not come. The third day of resurrection clearly points to the last day of glory.

Now I readily admit that I have been speaking with you in symbols and signs, on the one hand so ambiguous as to defy certainty, and on the other so as to make us afraid to presume that we understand. You may be sure, as well, that I am aware of treading on the repugnant ground of the otherworldly concepts, which is so nauseous to modern man. Indeed, if I may make a curious boast, it takes no little nerve to talk about the second coming in a place like this. Theologians of hope — a new and somewhat popular breed — make the matter a bit more respectable. But I do not intend to turn to this category for support.

No matter how ambiguous a symbol may be, if it can be applied to our experience, it has both sense and value. And that is what I propose. In other words, I believe that we can adopt a life style from these symbols of the third day of resurrection and the last day of the second coming. And I can see three characteristics of the style before us.

We are a people who wait for the final mystery of the faith to unfold. When we are questioned as to theodicy — How can a good God allow evil in the world? — we know that we must give the best answers that are available, but that in the final analysis we must wait and see and so must the world wait and see. And we live the resurrection life in terms of being up and around for what is yet to be. We make no grandiose claims for what we are. We make no intimations that we know more about the mystery than the unwashed. We simply celebrate the fact that Easter has guaranteed us a place at the last party, when we shall know.

I submit that this waiting style of life, a mixture of confidence and hope, can fit the human experience. It makes sense. It can be

lived as a way of life. It is confident without being cocksure. And it beckons to joy rather than burying us in sadness. If that were all, just the hope of being at the party, I could live with that. But that is not all.

We wait for the day when Christ, who overcame sin and death — giving us assurance of the same — will be vindicated in a victory celebration. He will be justified in the eyes of men. He will be verified as the genuinely human, the incarnate of God in history. By his vindication, we will be vindicated. All this foolishness will no longer be foolishness. All this caring, and waiting, and worshipping, and ritualizing, and baptizing, and communing, and integrating, and pacifying, and kingdom talking, and God language, and agape, and law — all of this folly will be seen as the wisdom of God.

And all that now we know is that we are the children of God, hidden in him with the Risen Lord. You see it has just occurred to me that this may be the best life style of all. I do not know who I am. But that is not doleful confession. I do not have to know right now, nor go around pinching myself into wakefulness trying to find out, nor worry about my masks, nor have an identity crisis. Hear the admission. I do not know who I am. But I will know even as I am fully known. You see, as God's children now, we do not even have to know who we are nor what we shall become. We can wait and see at the party. And that is a relief. We are resurrected. We have from now to then — from the third day to the last — to find out who we are. What a relief!

# The Theological Basis for Inclusiveness

There is an assumption in the title of this address which must not go unnoticed. I do not question whether or not there is a theological basis for inclusiveness, but we must entertain some doubt as to its relevance. For society in general, the problem of inclusive rather than exclusive man, regarding racial and all other barriers excepting denominationalism or dogma, is sociological rather than theological in nature.

Bishop Robinson in *The New Reformation* calls our attention to the change in man's search for community. No longer does he ask, how can I find a gracious God? but rather, how can I find a gracious neighbor? I am impressed that the majority which poses this question has already decided that God is irrelevant to the question of community.

It ought not to surprise us that this is the case. The community of faith has always managed, sometimes with no little effort, to pose the irrelevance of God both for itself and the whole of humankind. Consider the history of Israel. When these people were called into being by the word of God, the problem of finding a friend in nature was very much with them. Upon arriving in the Promised Land, they did not know how to capture the "flow of milk and honey." Their immediate need was to assure an existence by planting and harvesting the earth. No doubt but that they wondered, how can I find a gracious God? But in answer to their own question, they lusted for the gods of the Canaanites, the Baals, for these were the gods of fertility giving promise of regular and abundant harvests.

Thus it was that Yahweh, who delivered them from the furnaces of Egypt, was summarily dismissed when they had to become farmers. One can hardly expect the world to depend on the God whom the faithful have so consistently rejected throughout their history.

This faithlessness has never been more virulent than in the past few years when white Christians preempted God from what they called "their churches," so as to prohibit the presence of Negroes in their services of worshipping the God who has already been removed from the premises. There we stayed on our little reservations while the tide of history flowed through the streets until it was deep enough to lap at the edges of the lunch counters of the variety stores. The lines of communication were inundated by the human flood escaping from the cesspools of segregation as it sought out the river beds of social freedom. Those lines have not been repaired and we, on the Christian reservation, have been cut off from the outside world. It is a live possibility that they are beyond repair and will never again become operative.

A less dramatic but perhaps more significant fact has to do with the long history of barriers and divisions between men which have been erected in the name and for the sake of theology itself. Although not common only to the United States, the tragic consequence of religious pluralism has nowhere been so starkly realized. Sidney Mead has observed that the Christians in this new land agreed with each other that an ordered society was dependent upon a body of beliefs and principles held in common by the majority of the people. The only disagreement at this point between the established and the free churchmen was whether acquiescence to this body of beliefs should be coerced with the help of the state or should come by means of persuasion.

The free church principle prevailed and religious freedom was assured. An important and negative factor, which was unnoticed in the rapture over religious liberty stemming from those days was the nature and quality of the dogma by which the denominations justified their existence and distinguished themselves from each other. Mead is particularly insightful at this juncture. Since the various churches agreed on the beliefs, which would assure an ordered society and a community of men, the beliefs which separated them from each other were, by the same token, irrelevant to order and community. By their own admission the distinctive prin-

ciples of the denominations were hardly beneficial and certainly not necessary to the common welfare. Mead concludes, perhaps with some sardonic amusement, that the result of all this is that the public school is the religious establishment in the United States. Here are located both the teaching and the deeds considered necessary to the country's welfare. This is borne out by the fact that no longer does the majority in the civil rights movement concern itself with integrating the churches but is increasing the pressure to integrate the schools. Indeed, the few churches which are open to all races are having difficulty persuading Negroes to become a part of their congregations.

Looking back one wonders how the churches ever expected to be relevant to the crisis of race when they were already so miserably divided on the irrelevant issues of dogmas that they would die for. We can hardly expect the culture to look to churches to lead the way in social inclusiveness when they exclude one another by baptism, communion, and other theologically distorted positions.

We churchmen must realize that we are presently immobilized, impaled on the hook of our own failures. Whether God is going to use the church and its theological format for assuring community in the world is a moot question. He must answer it. We cannot.

We can, however, seek out a way to "get off the hook" if God calls us back to work out of his grace and mercy. What to do when we get our feet on the ground again will be a part of our responsibility. God will give us marching orders, but we must be willing to join with his will in determining our direction and our objective.

If the theological dimension is to recover relevance, a radical direction and conduct are indicated. I propose the most radical of all apparent possibilities. With full acknowledgment of the church's failure to do much, if anything, noteworthy in the avant-garde of the entire civil rights movement, I am convinced that the church should now dare to judge the movement, both its means and its ends — its methods and its results, by the revelation given from God in a theological construct.

This will be a calculated risk. The church will naturally suffer the shame and embarrassment of being reminded of its failures at every turn. Yet I am convinced that nothing short of this kind of radical venture will restore the theological relevance to the problem

of human community. The only witness it can make will appropriate Paul's Corinthian word:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

Had the first apostles refused to proclaim the Gospel in the wake of their betrayals, denials, and cowardly desertion at Calvary, the world would have been bereft. The social milieu of this day will be equally bereft unless the church is willing to bring judgment, from its theological perspective, upon the civil rights movement.

That judgment must begin with the church's own confession. That judgment must admit that justice cannot always wait for love. But such judgment must not end until it insists that love cannot be reduced solely to the technique of nonviolent demonstration. It is up to the church to say forcefully and unequivocally that the end result of the civil rights movement, if it follows its present trend, will be freedom of movement and access for the Negro over a wide social expanse but that it will not eventuate into brotherhood or communities established and informed by love. Let me repeat that the fact of the church's failure even at the level of common justice must not be allowed to silence its prophetic word in this primary need. This may be the only line of communication which has not been so badly damaged by the storm as to be beyond repair.

Most of the time it is better to deal with the obvious than with the less apparent. Were I to do this in connection with the theological basis for inclusiveness, I would naturally deal with justice, brotherhood, and love. My decision to take a different tack in no way disparages the primary significance of these theological concerns. That they have been proclaimed so much that they are falling on deaf ears prompts me to bring to attention some supporting theological considerations which have not received the notice they are due.

The first matter that should claim our consideration, in this wise,

is the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. The doctrine needs contemporary implementation so that its force will not be spent on speculating about man's appearance or condition after death. Its point of application ought to rest on what this means about living men in the present time. The doctrine insists that man cannot be divided into flesh and spirit, body and soul. He is whole man and is affected wholly by his experiences and his relationships. As the doctrine of "total depravity" was drawn to indicate that man could not sin in a part of his being but was sinful in every facet of his life, so the resurrection of the body means that man cannot be hurt, loved, accepted, or rejected in part. His whole being is affected.

The implication ought then to be clear. One cannot be physically segregated and spiritually integrated. If a man's skin is rejected, his heart knows it and no amount of argument or assurance to the contrary will make a particle of difference. Conversely, one who rejects a person's physical presence cannot love that person in some spiritualized sense no matter how spiritual he thinks he is. Those people who segregate now but agree that there will be no segregation in heaven are counting on God's skinning all of us as soon as we are far enough through the pearly gates to satisfy any modesty we may have. What if God did not? Some men would probably seek other accommodations.

Men of pure hatred will not be appreciably moved by this argument, but it ought to do something for the misguided creature who has lived with one set of physical values and another set of spiritual values. This is a false dichotomy, and the sooner we realize it the better. Man's attitude toward God cannot be separated from the condition of his stomach. An empty belly does not move him toward God seeking nurture for an emaciated spirit or soul. The whole man is either loved or hated — included or excluded. And the whole man is affected one way or the other. Incalculable damage has been done to man because this doctrine has not been taken seriously. Incalculable good may ensue when it is taken seriously.

The definition of the church is the second theological consideration to which I would call your attention. The church is not a static society, the definition of which should remain inviolate from its beginnings. It was a significant stand that the free churches, from which the Baptists have evolved, took in connection with the Ref-

ormation. They insisted that restitution rather than reformation was the basic need. They were unwilling to recognize the church of their day as the genuine article needing renovation. Instead, they argued for the restoration of the true church and set about to see that this should come to pass. I would not have us go back on that. It has enriched the life of the church for all these centuries. What does call for a more careful scrutiny is whether or not we should follow our forebears in their insistence that the only valid and relevant church for any day is one taken from the model of the New Testament church. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this was probably the case. It is not necessarily the same for the twentieth century. One need not disregard the virtues of the New Testament church in striving for churches which are authentic and effective in the present era. But in seeking to define the church for now, he must first take notice of the twentieth century condition rather than thinking in terms of first century needs. I believe that Paul Tillich came very close to defining the twentieth century church in a commendable and helpful way. He has described a church that does have the ingredients of an accepting or inclusive community. At the same time, he sees the need for some kind of personal decision on the part of those seeking acceptance. A church, he wrote, is a community of those who affirm that Jesus is the Christ. The very name Christian implies this. For the individual, this means a decision — not as to whether he, personally, can accept the assertion that Jesus is the Christ, but the decision as to whether or not he wishes to belong or not to a community which asserts that Jesus is the Christ. If he decides against this, he has left the church, even if, for social or political reasons, he does not formalize his denial. Many formal members in all the churches more or less consciously do not want to belong to the church. The church can tolerate them, because it is not based on individual decisions but on the spiritual presence and its media.

The church as an accepting community must be the hallmark of its existence and ministry for these days. And what impresses me about Tillich's definition is that a church can be an accepting community so long as it knows Jesus Christ and is blessed by his presence. So long as the church maintains this posture it need not be threatened by any stranger which appears on its threshold.

This kind of radical inclusiveness on the part of the church would go so far beyond the question of race and class categories as to make a segregated church utterly ridiculous. To return to my original question. The answer to theological relevance to the question of inclusiveness will lie with these kinds of daring and adventurous doctrines. It is time that we face up to our theological tasks.



# Christians and War

June 8, 1974

*Exodus 15:1-3; 17:14-16; John 18:33-36*

On the day that the Lord saved Israel, when the Red Sea clapped its mighty hands together on the Egyptians, Moses and Israel sang this song:

The Lord is a man of war  
the Lord is his name.

On the day that Israel fought with Amalek at Rephidim, winning the victory while Moses's hands were held aloft by Aaron and Hur, Moses made a memorial and said: "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

War was not a problem for ancient Jewish theology. They were deemed to be holy wars because they were waged against the enemies of God and therefore against the enemies of the chosen people of God. Those who sought to hold the people of God in bondage, those who stood in their path to the land of promise, and those who made war on Israel were considered to be the enemies of God. They were consequently to be defeated and punished by the only means which seemed to be available, that of battle. In the eyes of Israel it was appropriate to sing:

The Lord is a man of war.

Match this song against that hallelujah accompanying the birth of Jesus Christ and you have a stand off:

Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace and goodwill to men.

Such a chorus was not completely foreign to the expectations surrounding the coming of the Messiah. One of the most brilliant and mightiest of the prophets, Isaiah, spoke of the child to be born who

was to be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Christians have often oversimplified the problem of contradiction which is here. They like to think of the ancient Jew as one who had no trouble saying "The battle is Yahweh's" while they think of themselves as peace-loving folks. Such a division is too neatly drawn.

Out of such a faith and tradition of Judeo-Christianity, we are forced to make up our minds about a defense budget such as is now being debated between Congress and the administration.

History gives the lie to this kind of assumption. Christians have participated in, and waged, many wars, believing their cause to be just and therefore their war to be holy. That is a cause of some embarrassment.

It would be comparatively easy to point to the brew in the Mideast, that constant battleground between Israel and the Arabs, as an example of those who believe that "The Lord is a man of war." It would be easy, that is, were it not for the fact that the Catholics and Protestants continue to go at one another in Ireland, and the Christians are set for battle with the Moslems in Lebanon.

If these incidents were radical departures from the history of "Christian wars," we could treat them as exceptions to the general rule. The fact is that Christians have been fighting with the heathen, and with one another, and as Christian nation against infidel nations for longer than any of us want to remember. So far as the record goes, Christians and "Christian nations" are every bit as bellicose as any other kind of people.

It has become a commonplace for Christians to explain that in so doing they have departed from the teachings of Jesus. Consequently, they take comfort in the fact that their sins in this regard are forgiven because they had to take a practical and immediate action under the circumstances.

Actually only a segment of the Christian community follows this kind of thinking. There are many Christians who support the cause of war and continue to believe that God is on their side in the battle. An inventory of what these Christians believe as over against the others is most revealing.

Those who are not enamored with the pacifist position have an attitudinal mix. Their evangelistic motivations are otherworldly in

nature. This means that they believe the world is sinful and doomed. People need to be saved from this world in order that they might go to heaven. In a word, they did not affirm this world as one of noticeable possibility.

It might logically be assumed that these Christians, so negative in their attitudes about the world, would not think any part of it worth fighting for. It does not work out like that. For the most part, these Christians did not believe that we should have gotten out of Vietnam. They are likely to support President Ford's call for a powerful military nation in order that it might stand against the possible enemies that may ensue.

Although such Christians do not believe that the world as a whole is worth fighting for, they tend to identify Christianity with the United States. They think of this as a Christian nation. It must stand if the Gospel is to be preached to all men in order for them to be saved. The command to love one's enemy is a command which applies to individuals and not to nations. Communism, godless and atheistic, is therefore the most tangible enemy, and to destroy communism with the bomb, or the gas, or the missile, is to do the will of God.

It is not too great a stereotype to point out that Christians of these persuasions may be listed under the general label of conservative and even fundamentalistic.

On the other side are believers who affirm the world with enthusiasm and have great hope for its possibilities. They envision the realization of the kingdom of God within history and on the earth and thus apply themselves to making the world one with the kingdom of God. They are less likely to identify their nation with the cause of Christ and may be less fervently patriotic than their counterparts. They are interested in the elimination of poverty and prejudice in the world.

Although they affirm the world as a whole, they do not so greatly affirm any of its parts. Thus they assume that none of its divisions are worth fighting for. Since they hope that the world can become the kingdom of God, and since they know that the kingdom of God will not come by the sword, these people are very much against war of any kind. They do not work for a strongly militarized nation. They were glad for us to get out of Vietnam. And they want to use tax money for the elimination of the causes of war, as they

understand them, rather than for defeating an endless line of enemies.

I have spoken of these divisions only as they appear in the Christian communities. The same divisions seem to exist even when they are under the aegis of no religion. This fact compounds the problem all the more. On which side are you? On which side do you think you ought to be?

The teachings of Jesus will not prove to be as plentifully helpful as one might suppose. Although we call him the Prince of Peace, it is not easy to find a sizeable body of definitive teachings about war from the life and ministry of Jesus. Our text is fraught with intriguing nuances of meaning. After he had reprimanded Simon Peter for using the sword at the time of his arrest, Jesus was brought before Pilate. Pilate asked him if he were king of the Jews. And Jesus replied that his kingdom or kingship was not of this world. If it were of this world, Jesus said, "my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from this world." The implications of this answer are inescapable. The core of the answer had to do with the kingdom of God. Since that kingdom is not of this world, then the servants of Christ are not to fight to establish it. But if it were, then the servants would do battle. As John understood Jesus in this setting, the Savior did not exploit the situation in order to deliver a sermon on the evils of war and force. To the contrary, he envisioned the possibility that were he trying to be the worldly ruler that some would have him to be, his servants would unsheathe their swords and do battle. The scriptures record the sword which Peter used. And they also refer to other swords which the disciples were carrying with Jesus's knowledge and with apparently his tacit approval, at the time of his arrest.

We may draw three conclusions, more or less, from this event. First of all, Jesus outlawed war as a means of bringing the kingdom of God to pass. Furthermore, he was indeed a person of peace and every intimation about Christ is one of peace. However, it cannot be said that Jesus specifically condemned nations (which were not the kingdom of God) in their use of war for their own behalf. He did not condemn his ancestry for fighting their way into the Promised Land.

In the second place, the conservatives are right in their generally pessimistic view about the future of this world. As it is, it cannot be

the kingdom of God. Only by radical conversion can it possibly be one with the kingdom of God. But they are wrong in trying to identify some part of the world, such as our own nation, with the Christian cause or with the kingdom. And they are quite confused if they believe that the Christian cause may be advanced by war. The nation is not to be confused with the church. And to be sure, war is not waged by the church.

The liberals are right in their hope for peace. But they are wrong in their optimistic affirmation of the world. Therefore, their blanket pacifism fails to take into account the fact that some parts of the world may be more just and righteous than others, and that there is some reason to believe that these nations have a right to assure their own perpetuity, even if war is the recourse which has to be used to that end.

In the third place, and most importantly, we are once again reminded that neither the Christian individual nor the church is able to develop an ethic which is either against or for war in every circumstance. Jesus has never given us a single teaching by which we may always with certainty abide, thus never needing by prayer, and scripture, and church, and tradition to examine the will of God in given situations.

Although there are certain guidelines to which we have called attention, and there are certain principles about which we should have conviction, we cannot make them ultimate. The cause of Israel, the cause of the Arabs, the cause of Catholic or Protestant in Ireland, the cause of Moslem or Christian in Lebanon must all be taken seriously. But it is not within human achievement to know for certain. God's will is not mapped out for all generations and every person at every time. It is not a blueprint but an experience.



# On Prayer, The Jews, and Bailey Smith

*October 5, 1980*

*Lev. 26:40-46; Romans 11:1-16*

"God does not hear the prayer of the Jew." So spoke the President of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Reverend Mr. Bailey Smith, when recently he was in Dallas, Texas, conversing at the Roundtable, at which there was gathered a considerable number of right wing religiously and politically minded fundamentalists. Let us not make more of the matter than reality permits. This was not the most earthshaking statement of the century. Many who have been outraged by Smith's declaration are certainly not concerned with whose prayers God does or does not hear. As they see it, he hears no prayers; a dead or nonexistent God can hardly be fitted with a live ear. Secularists, if they do take exception to Smith's remarks, will be probably concerned for the most part that this Baptist preacher has made an un-American statement.

From a Christian and therefore religious point of view, I should like to begin by commending two facets of Smith's premise. We should be glad that he has called into question the practice of our major political parties in granting equal time for Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant prayers at their conventions. This strikes me as an attempt to curry votes from the religious people of America rather than one designed for securing God's favor. If the religions of the East and the third world, the Moonies, Scientologists, and others become more populous in membership, we may anticipate a time when political conventions will turn into protracted prayer meetings; they may even have to add another day to their schedule in order to give place for hordes of praying preachers.

I also concur with Mr. Smith's implication that Christians are not honoring their faith when they are forever dumping their distinctiveness into a mess of ecumenical stew. Due to my homiletical schedule, this sermon fell on the Sunday when we regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper. My first thought was to postpone one or the other. But then it occurred to me that, even as we are taking exception to the insult which one of our own has delivered to the Jews, we should also be observing a sacrament which is not for everyone but only for those who have been baptized into Christ. This is to say that the more unapologetically Christian we are, the more our love and respect for Jews and others will mean in the long run.

The problem before us is a Baptist problem. Make no mistake about that. So far as America is concerned, Bailey Smith has spoken for the Baptists. We can try to explain, in the light of local church autonomy and our cherished tradition of religious freedom, that Mr. Smith may speak only for himself. The public is not going to buy that explanation. And if we truly believed it, we would not go to so much trouble to refute Mr. Smith's statements.

The president of Southern Baptists, so far as their convention is concerned, has misrepresented Baptists to the nation. The matter of a public image is involved but the real damage has occurred because Mr. Smith has distorted the gospel, which along with other Christians we are obligated to proclaim. The only way to get out from under his onus, imposed on us without our knowledge or consent, is to get rid of Mr. Smith. He should resign. If he will not resign, he should be relieved of his presidential duties. At least, he should not be elected to a second term. I know that I am probably spitting into the wind as I call for these radical remedies. The powers that be apparently think to the contrary. The General Board of our Baptist State Convention has already neglected to take a cue from our Christian Life Commission so as to censure Mr. Smith. Mr. Reagan, who went to the Roundtable and said, "You cannot endorse me, but I am here to endorse you," has not seen fit to withdraw his endorsement of Mr. Smith. President Carter, who called Bailey Smith in the wake of the latter's election, to say, "Congratulations, you are now my president," has not to my knowledge called a second time to say, "Now you are not my president." Perhaps he

fears that it would go "tit for tat," each Baptist president saying to the other, "You are no longer my boy."

Even so, I stand on what I have said: Southern Baptists should get rid of Mr. Smith by whatever honorable means may avail.

With Mr. Smith, we should take recourse in the Bible, the "inerrant book" according to the strident and vindictive claims of the man, if we are to dispute as Christians and Baptists.

Let me warn you at the outset that we can find no better proof texts for a contrary position than Smith can find for his. The two passages read from the pulpit today make evident that God's reaction to the Jews has always been dynamic rather than static. They indicate that up until the time they were written, God had not made up his mind about the Jews, and there is every indication that this is also the present circumstance.

Leviticus is but loosely associated with the New Testament if at all. It is overloaded with external matters of law and ritual. At the same time, it repeats a theme running through the whole concourse of Hebrew scripture. God's people have run out on him, are running around on him, breaking the covenant and chasing after idols. They are called to repentance. If they do not repent, they are threatened with exile, threatened with God's intention to turn his back upon them. While they are in exile, their own beloved land will be forced to enjoy its Sabbaths while lying desolate. But Leviticus also reads like this, "Yet for all that," says the Lord, "when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God; . . . I will for their sake remember the covenant."

Paul's letter to the Romans is marked by similar tension. "So I ask," he wrote, "have they (the Jews) stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous." Paul prays that the Jews will come to Christ, because "if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" Paul believed that the rejection of the Jews turned out to be a sacrifice given for the salvation of Gentiles. At the same time, the salvation of Gentiles could never be wholly consummated until the "full inclusion" of the Jews had taken place. The tension persisted in the mind and faith of Paul.

If we are to be honest, we must admit that there are literal passages in scripture to the effect that God does not hear the prayers of Israel, therefore of the Jews. We read in Isaiah 59, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, nor his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he does not hear." But as might be expected this sound of bad news is tempered by the sound of good in Isaiah 65, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." In Isaiah 59, God seems to have had his ear tuned in on the law, but in 65, his ear was set on grace.

What is most astonishing about these passages, testifying to God's deafness to the pleas of the Jews, is that they are confined to the book of the Jews; they do not appear in Christian scripture. There is nothing in the latter to support the premise that God does not hear the prayers of Jews. Therefore, a Jew has good reason to speculate on whether or not God hears his prayers. If Bailey Smith were a Jew, he would have been in better position to say what he said, but as a Christian he spoke without justification.

Let me intrigue you all the more. It is obvious that the Old Testament passages, filled with the threats of God's deafness, refer to those Jews who have broken covenant, disobeyed the law, pursued idols and false gods, and lived immoral lives. They were not going to be heard because they were bad Jews. This realization allows for a profound, and perhaps new, interpretation of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The former was a righteous Jew, the latter unrighteous. But the prayer of the bad Jew was the one answered even to the heights of his exaltation. Was Jesus indeed saying in effect, "It is not so that God will not hear the prayer of an unrighteous Jew; he will indeed as is offered in this parable."

I trust that it will not offend the Jew, if I should say that this is what a Christian understands about the relationship between God and his "first chosen." He understands it because he is a Christian and in a way not to be understood by a Jew. Therefore, Mr. Smith has distorted the gospel.

By virtue of his distortion of the gospel, the Reverend Mr. Smith has insulted Jews, God, and Christians. He has insulted the Jews by

assuming the role of a "Johnny Jump-up, Johnny Come Lately" child of God, who presumes that he has preempted Jews, in their favor with God, by favor he has been given through Christ. His insult is akin to that which the prodigal son imposed upon the elder brother, as he gorged on the fatted calf, before the father could persuade his first born to come into the party. But at least, the prodigal son had the decency and grace to keep his mouth shut except as was necessary for eating. Be reminded that the parable ends with the father out in the field, assuring the elder son that they have always been together and everything which is his, the father's, also belongs to that son. That is a sobering word for Christians like Mr. Smith or those who agree with him.

Mr. Smith has insulted God. He has insulted God by implying that God is a liar, that he will go back on his Word, that he has broken the very covenant he said he would never forsake. It is not God's omnipotence which Smith has called into question. Of course, it is true that finite man can neither know or determine what prayers God may hear. But the more profound insult is the implication that God is not to be trusted.

Finally, Mr. Smith has insulted his fellow Christians. He has delivered himself of a gospel of hate rather than one of grace. I know that he has insisted that he loves the Jews. But his remarks indicate that God does not love them, else how could he refuse to hear their prayers. And I am sure that Jews, as is true with us also, are not as concerned with the love of Mr. Smith as they are with the love of God. Let it be admitted that any gospel capitalizes on the fears of people, their fears for themselves in this world and the next. But the gospel of grace banks on the promise that "perfect love casts out fear" because "there is no fear in love." Another gospel, a false one to be sure, capitalizes on the people's fears by assuring them that they may expect a blessing from God which he will withhold from anyone who is not like them. There are still scars across the countenance of Europe, because frightened people took courage from a gospel of hate, which promised them the superiority of the pure and caused them to reduce uncounted Jews to ashes. One need never use the word as such, but the gospel is one of hate whenever it calls God away from others so that we may enjoy his full and undivided attention and grace.

In all of this, I am not going to hate Smith in order to prove my love for the Jews; I am not about to say that because of what Mr. Smith has done, God will not hear his prayers. I do hope that he is praying even more than usual during these days. But the gospel tells me that, even if he is not doing so, God has forgiven him already in Christ Jesus our Lord.

# Gratitude Is a Decision

*November 18, 1973*

*Psalm 122; Col. 3:12-17*

Thanksgiving is an authentic characteristic of the Christian faith. If it is not the most significant of all, it assuredly gives every rival a run for the money. I know of no theologian who would contradict this general position. Disagreement sets in with regard to a related matter, which is almost as fundamental as the first. Whether gratitude is spontaneous and therefore cannot be commanded or whether it is a decision in obedience to a command will seldom go wanting for an argument.

I was surprised to read one scholar's commentary, dealing as it did with both of our scripture passages, yet stating that exhortations such as these to be grateful were strange because "gratitude cannot be commanded, but must spring spontaneously from the heart."

The other position beckons most to me. For the most part, gratitude is a matter of the will. One usually decides whether or not to be grateful. Although this does not completely rule out the spontaneity of gratitude, it does assert that we must be grateful — and can be — even when the conditions favoring spontaneous thanksgiving do not prevail.

In other words, in most of those times when we are not grateful, we ought to be and are indeed commanded to be. Even when the blessing count does not add up to gratitude, the decision to be grateful is still a live one.

Our founding fathers apparently recognized this reality. They set aside a day to be thankful. Although Thanksgiving Day is not a part of the Christian calendar, its theme of calling for gratitude is

very much in harmony with the religious position. Religion not only encourages thanksgiving but also enjoins it.

In this vein the pilgrim author expressed gladness that he was invited to go to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. And he went to the holy city because the Lord had decreed that the tribes of Israel were to do so. Furthermore, the central purpose of the pilgrimage was to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

Psalm 122 testifies that an integral part of the Judeo-Christian discipline was that of gratitude. The pilgrims had their reasons for going to Jerusalem. One of their motivations was that of giving thanks. And they decided beforehand that they would give thanks in the temple of the city of God.

The years have not changed the concept. Gratitude remains a part of our religious discipline. Even when spontaneous gratitude is highly unlikely, it is our discipline to come to this place on the Lord's day and to give thanks. Among others, this is a good and sufficient reason to contend that gratitude is a decision.

A vision of the author of the Book of Revelation seems to strike a blow for spontaneous thanksgiving. He saw the angels, elders, and strange creatures gathered before the throne and saying:

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might be to our God forever and ever  
Amen.”

But when the question was raised as to what had occasioned so great an outburst of praise, the answer indicated that there were reasons for the decision to be grateful. The thanksgivers had been brought through great tribulation. Their robes had been washed to whiteness in the blood of the Lamb. And they were to be guided by the lamb to springs of living water and God was to wipe away every tear from their eyes.

“And whatever you do,” was Paul’s words to the Colossians, “in words or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

Surely, it comes down to this in a time like this, when the cause for thanksgiving is not all that apparent, when occasion for spontaneous thanksgiving is rare indeed, surely gratitude is then dependent upon the decision of the faithful — to be or not to be thankful.

We need this caution. If we agree that gratitude is more volitional than it is emotional, if it is more deliberate than spontaneous, then

one will be forced to ask and answer the question — not once but many times — “Why should I decide to be grateful?”

The decision to be so seems often to be arbitrary. It works out to being thankful no matter what. As a general rule, we might assume that one must decide to be grateful when he is hard put to find sufficient and evident reasons for being so. This is not always the case. The same arbitrariness must sometimes operate when there are abundant reasons for gratitude but the majority of the blessed do not choose to be so.

Luke has a terse account of ten lepers. It is told with tough irony. The ten asked Jesus for mercy. He told them to go show themselves to the priests. Show themselves, I suppose, with their eroded bodies and faces half eaten away, to the same kind of priest who passed on the other side when the man beset by thieves was lying in the ditch. As it turned out they did not have to suffer that kind of embarrassment and ignominy. Even as they went their way to the priest they were cleansed and healed. Whatever happened to nine of them is not told. Did they go on to the priests anyway? We do not know. One returned and threw himself at the feet of Jesus in gratitude. He was a Samaritan. What grand and awful music Luke, most of all, played about priests and Samaritans.

Jesus could not help but wonder why all but this foreigner went on their way without deciding to give thanks. In any event, the story serves our premise very well indeed. It clearly indicates that gratitude is a decision not only when the conditions are not favorable but even when they are.

“Ingratitude is sin,” thundered Karl Barth. Let us elaborate. Ingratitude is sin precisely because gratitude is both a confession of sin and faith. Ingratitude is sin precisely because it denies rather than confesses sin and thus precludes any confession of faith.

To be ungrateful is either to assume that one deserves the good he receives or is shortchanged when he does not get all that he contends is his desert or is unjust when life caves in on him.

Gratitude is a way of putting oneself in one’s place before God: dependent upon the grace of God and waiting for his bounty all the while confessing that our earning power with respect to life’s “goodies” can purchase little or nothing.

The decision to be grateful also opens our eyes to blessings to which ingratitude always blinds us with sightlessness. This is to

wager that gratitude quite often must precede its own reasons and that when it does, the reasons for thanksgiving are much more evident. We are so busy worrying about having to turn down our thermostats. If we decided to be grateful to God regardless, it might occur to us that we are indeed fortunate to have thermostats to run back to sixty-eight or sixty-five or whatever. It may even make us mindful of those people who will be lucky if they can ever get the heat up to sixty-five in their open, cracked houses. Let that be no cause for gratitude; simply let gratitude open one's eyes to the fact that he has a thermostat and others do not.

The decision to be grateful in such a context is a most dynamic factor in Christian experience. If I cannot enjoy what I have even when another does not have it, I deny the grace of God to me and cancel out gratitude and that is sin. In other words, to be so remorseful over the disadvantage of others so as to be unable to celebrate one's own sense of God's grace is to commit the sin of ingratitude.

By the same token, to shrug off the despair of others by assuming, "there but for the grace of God go I" is to decide that God's grace is selective. This really is not a testimony to grace because we cannot help but believe that such selective grace is the better part of wisdom on God's part. What is called for is to rejoice in God's grace on the one hand, never drawing odious comparisons so far as that grace is concerned, and in gratitude rejoicing in God's gifts, yet all the while being moved by that same gratitude to care for our brother by seeing that he also has a thermostat or a turkey, or whatever, even if it means that we must give him ours.

The decision to be grateful is a decision to become salt and light. Gratitude not only opens our eyes to newfound blessings but it gives us light by which the blessings of God are revealed to others. Those of us old enough to remember gasoline rationing during the Second World War remember how much fun it was to use the gasoline allotted to go see someone you really wanted to see. In that case both the visitor and the visited were blessed by the reciprocal affirmation. Persons, things, and places that were authentic treasures were still within reach. The valuable and the dear were enhanced.

Should we follow suit with other countries which have either

banned gasoline powered travel on the weekends or at least the sale of gasoline, the church would be faced with a struggle. But the struggle would not be futile. Perhaps we would walk or have house churches or use some other alternative. In any event, what the church then would mean to some of us would salt and season humanity with a good taste for the church.

In a real sense the matter is one of decision. The question is not, *can* you be grateful? but *will* you be grateful? The low state of society and history at the present may convince us that we have as many reasons for not being as there are reasons for being grateful.

But should we in faith decide to give thanks to God and thanks for God, and thanks for Christ and his redemption; then the chances are that we shall find the hidden reasons for such gratitude. Even if such reasons are a long time in coming to be seen, we can still give thanks that we are able to be grateful, which is the evidence of our faith and the hope that we have now and whenever.



# Mother?

May 13, 1979

*Jeremiah 31:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-13*

Is Ralph Nader trying to be my mother? Or Joseph Califano my stepmother — the difference being that Mr. Califano treats all North Carolinians like stepchildren? Or is it only my imagination, which makes me suspect those two, among a plenty, who sound and act like my mother as they cluck their warnings and spread their sheltering wings?

It has been quite some time since I have mentioned mother or motherhood on a "Mother's Day Sunday." And I have felt justified in refraining from doing so, because of the day's corruption from commercialism, it's being iced over with sentimental goo, and my own desire to be that kind of sophisticated minister who keeps up with the times.

But as of now, I am convinced that whatever the time, it necessitates a new look at mother. There is the saying, based on our instinctive religious nature, that if there was no God we would eventually invent one. May we not draw an analogy and say, given our instinctive childlikeness, that if there were no mothers, no institution of motherhood, we would inevitably invent either or both?

Nader and Califano seem to be proving that assumption. Although I have some reservations about these two gentlemen, I cast no aspersions on them for trying to mother the nation and its people; they are the products of our invention. It may be that necessity is not only the mother of invention but that necessity also demands the invention of mother. I am consequently no longer disposed to disparage the practice of mothering but rather to con-

tend that if mothering is essential, we would be better served by the real thing than by Nader and Califano.

To put it bluntly, we need mothers. We need mothers to bear and issue children, we need them for the children that are issued, students need mothering educational institutions, and people need mothering churches, perhaps parishioners need mothering clergymen. And I dare say, that in whatever cases it seems necessary for men to do the mothering, their effectiveness in this regard will largely depend on their having learned how to mother from women. One of the reasons for my conviction in this regard is due to my realization that women have those kinds of maternal instincts, whether or not they have ever been married or borne children, which equip them for the mothering of humanity. Among some of my most cherished experiences have been my knowledge of and friendship with unmarried and childless women who have reached out to mother a community, an institution, or whatever, with an incredibly gracious wisdom. Therefore, I am sure that mothers ought to be women and when this is impossible mothering men must learn their trade from women.

I cannot spend the time arguing for the recovery of motherhood. I will simply dogmatize and declare that those who have never found it necessary to cut the apron strings are far worse off for not having gone through the experience. Those who have never had to deal with caring, coaxing, chiding mothers are those who need to be mothered most in their adult years. I agree with William Willimon that the children of the typical "Jewish mother" and of her kind, among whatever religion or race, were given something to live for as the mother stood "over the piano mercilessly coaxing a budding prodigy or arguing at the kitchen table over how many green beans were enough. While their methods of child-rearing may have spawned some neuroses, their children never suffered from the anger, emptiness, and despair that often haunt children denied the lifelong benefits of strong, early, and continuing affectional bonds."

If you agree that we need to revisit the whole question of mother, I must warn you that so long as society continues to treat mothers as second class citizens, by virtue of the fact that they are women, our hopes and aspirations for the recovery of mother will probably not

be fulfilled. Because of the strong connection between being women and being mothers, a culture which denigrates women also denigrates mothers.

By way of illustration, let me say in my own behalf that I have often been misunderstood when I have discouraged women, and some of you have received such discouragement, from asking that they be treated like persons instead of women or at least treated like persons before being treated like women. One of the reasons for my being misunderstood is my own fault: I tend to quip facetiously when encountering pain, and often do not speak to the pain as forthrightly as I should. So let me state it now and speak to it in such a way as to be understood. Whenever I hear a woman say that she prefers to be treated like a person instead of a woman, I feel pain as I wonder what in God's name this generation has done to women. If we have made it necessary for women to distinguish between being a person and a female, we have done them a grave injustice. By definition a person is a human being as distinguished from an animal or a thing. So if women are forced to distinguish between being a person or a female, they are saying in effect that we have treated them like things. Is it any wonder that they do not wish to be identified as women or mothers? It is beyond my comprehension that we have made mothers think of themselves as things, but this is precisely what seems to have occurred.

If my assessment is correct, motherhood can only be revisited when the woman's movement has enjoyed success. Society must not continue to skew the issue by seeing "woman's liberation" as something antithetical to being mother. I am sure that many pulpits today are being filled with this misguided opinion. Let us quit trying simply to get women back into the home. All mothers are working mothers, in or outside the home. The issue is that they be mothers, respected, admired, as persons to be sure but also as women and mothers.

Another barrier to the recovery of motherhood is our desire to keep up with the times. Some of us believe that mother was once essential to our culture but that times have changed so that this is no longer the case. We think we have left such primitivism behind. Our culture, because of its consistent commitment to the ideal, tends to believe that the new is always superior to the old. Ideals in

modern society are goal oriented, which means that the past and the present can never be as good as the future.

It is here that the church has a perspective not shared by secular society. Its perspective is not only basic to giving motherhood its due but also provides a corrective on the misinterpretation of time. That perspective is one of eternity, meaning that past, present and future may be viewed in wholeness.

I selected the passage from Jeremiah in order to present this perspective. The Lord said, "I will be the god of all the families of Israel. I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you." And then this key word, thrice stated: "*Again* I will build you — *Again* you shall go forth in the dance of merrymakers — *Again* you shall plant vineyards upon the mountains of Samaria."

Israel has always seen her future in terms of the recovery of the past. Do you not find it instructive that Israel has progressed faster than any of her neighboring nations with this kind of "backward look," which is of course not a backward look, but an eternal vision?

The writer to the Ephesians speaks of God's mystery hidden in the ages, which the church is given power to explain, even to the point at which "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known." The writer was not thinking of mother when writing these words, but they do apply.

Mother is no less indispensable to today than she was yesterday. Her role and her gifts cannot be set to the passing of time. Today's mother is neither better or worse than the one of yesterday.

Despite the obvious chauvinistic themes in scriptures, those themes are not as one-sided as we might suppose. Jesus taught us to think of God as Father. That is chauvinistic only if we think that Jesus was trying to get us to think of God as masculine or as man. What if he was more concerned to say that God was a parent and we were his children? In other words, we are probably enjoined to think of God as Daddy, with masculinity being secondary to the conception of God as parent.

And I would remind you that this same Jesus when brooding over the dismal future of Jerusalem, said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not." Jesus saw the city as an adolescent rebelling against its mother and saw himself in mater-

nalistic terms. And there can be no doubt but that he meant that God was also like this.

I have discovered that the minister not only needs to father but also to mother, and that the church has to be a mothering institution. As a matter of fact, most successful families have wives who mother the entire family, including husbands. I have watched the demise of *in loco parentis* on this campus with great regret because students are not beyond their need of mothering. And instead of graduating students who have learned how already to cut the strings, we send them forth to a mothering government, which is the least likely because she is a woman with too much authority.

Willimon speaks of his grandmother-in-law, a Methodist minister, who took an incorrigible parish in South Carolina. When, for the first time, she was dealing with her people regarding the budget for the coming year, all went well until the consideration of a pledge to the Black College Fund. Then the chairman of the administration board said, "We ain't going to pay for no niggers to go to college. That's the way we are." And Bessie, the minister replied, "Tom, that's not nice. That is definitely not the way you are. You all can do better than that." And then, I would say not surprisingly under the circumstances, Tom sat down, said he was sorry, and recommended paying the total pledge.

That was a prophet speaking to Tom. But more than a prophet, a "mama prophet" in a "mama church." And the argument was not by recourse to scripture, nor on the basis of moral and ethical righteousness. Bessie told Tom that he was not a nice boy to act the way he did. It was this that Tom could not handle and to which he deferred.

And now will you permit me to speak of my own mother. She died too soon. But not before I discovered this much. She was not always right, but she always cared. The strength by which she protected me from danger was the strength against which I rebelled. But she gave me something to rebel against. And I thank God that I did not always win my rebellious battles. I doubt that Mr. Califano will ever make me give up my pipe. But if mother were around, it might be a different matter. She would not mention my health; she would probably say, "Nice ministers don't smoke." And despite the fact that her opinion was not quite right, it would give me problems.



# A Decalogue of Manifestoes

May 28, 1972

*Romans 7:4-12; Proverbs 28:1-9*

Since graduation time inevitably plays on the theme of "going out into the world;" it is fitting that we should use the day to address the stubborn problem of how the Christian is to live in that world. How to be in the world and not of it is such a sticky wicket as to make us sometimes wish that John's Gospel had not introduced the idea. How to be separately and distinctively Christian without completely jeopardizing our relationships with people of other faiths or of no faith at all has not yet become a major accomplishment of contemporary Christians. The problem of being effectively Christian in the world promises to be with us for a long time to come.

Two fairly recent conversations have provoked my attention in this respect. One was with a coed who seemed particularly anxious to convince herself that Christianity was neither greatly different from nor superior to other world religions. As a part of her argument she told us of a Buddhist acquaintance. After extolling a number of her friend's virtues, she concluded, "He is just as Christian in many respects as are so many of us who are in the church." It seemed to me that, in an effort to be very tolerant, she achieved the opposite result. Those characteristics of the Buddhist which elicited her admiration were assigned to Christian causes. She did not recognize that his virtues could have come from his being a good Buddhist rather than because of Christian influence. This kind of tolerance, filled with the best of intentions, inevitably turns out to be intolerance. If a Christian is to be open and honest with respect to other religions, he ought to give those religions due credit for

whatever virtues show up in their adherents. What is good in a Buddhist should be acknowledged as the result of good Buddhist religion rather than being ascribed to inadvertent Christian influence.

Another conversation occurred with a professor. On the one hand, he expressed the wish that the church would continue to participate meaningfully in society. He suggested that culture needed the rich diversity that was forthcoming from the moral and ethical insights of Christianity. On the other hand, he was asking for an emasculated Christianity. For he said, "But I do wish that we could be rid of Christianity's spooks." By such expression, he was ruling out the dimension of the supernatural, the category of the miraculous, and Christian devotion to the incarnate presence of God in the world.

The two conversations combine to highlight the problem. The coed was opting for a kind of Christianity that might show up anywhere even in other religions. The professor was opting for a Christianity, the distinctives of which would be left back at the church, whenever its advocates took up their burdens in the secular world. Both were designed to suggest that Christianity was not distinctive and should never try to be.

The number one temptation for Christians today, if and when they wish to practice servanthood in the world, is to become a good human being, nothing more or less, as a result of one's Christian faith. And it presupposes that the great themes of Christian doctrine are superfluous to one's becoming a good human being.

Enough of my colleagues, many of them dear and personal friends, have followed this Pied Piper's tune into the relevance of what they judged to be a wider ministry so as to convince me that the temptation is well nigh overwhelming. The central factors of the faith have been discarded as appendages to the good life. If a Christian turns out to be a good human being, practicing his servanthood in the world, it is not even interpreted as a result of his having been an authentic Christian. It may even mean that it is the result of his having sloughed off the Christian superfluities.

Way back when — when secularism was first flexing its muscles in full view of the church — Elton Trueblood warned us against a cut-flower Christianity. He gloomily predicted what would happen when the faith was separated from its roots. It would have to find a

different garden in which to acquire new life. So now it would seem to be searching for that life in the tolerance of the secular society. Thus we have come to what Martin Marty has called the time of religion in general.

This suggests that Christians are going to have to define their mission to the world on their own terms rather than on the world's terms. That will mean that the world will have to take the Christian as he is rather than the "despooned" model that it not only tolerates but seems to want.

We are under mandate to deliver a manifesto to the culture. Such a mandate or law will serve the purpose to which Paul assigned the law. Without the law we will not know that we have sinned. Without specific mandate, we will not be conscious that we are watering a cut-flower Christianity, which no amount of nurture can save because it is separated from its roots.

Perhaps we must be ready to recover the rugged distinction which crops up in the proverb: Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law strive against them.

I must contend against all contrary opinions that the sense of this mandate is not for the sake of the church but for the sake of the world. It is not for the purpose of keeping Christianity pure but for the purpose of offering the world a Christian service which it will not otherwise enjoy.

To make this claim without validating it would be foolish. There must not be greater claims than can be authenticated. The distinctions between the deeds of a secularist and of a Christian when engaged in common efforts are neither vividly apparent nor great in number. But there are some distinctions which are important. Let me mention three of them.

In the very first place, a Christian does not work in the world to save the world or himself. Jesus Christ has already accomplished that salvation in his life and work. When it becomes apparent that the Christian is not therefore frantically trying to assure salvation by his good deeds, indeed that no man has to set himself to that task, the question is bound to surface: "Then why be good? Why work at the back breaking task of cleaning up the world's mess?"

The Christian is then free to answer that he does so in obedience to God. He does not work for the world because it depends on his offering. He does not work for the world because, as a Christian, he

has become a good man. He is working in obedience to God. Such obedience sets him free to do what he must without being subject to a myriad of other considerations. And the world desperately needs men who are free in this sense. It needs men who do not look for other justifications of what they do other than as men obedient to God.

In the second place, Christians, who work as Christians in order to make the world a better place in which to live, pour into culture a model of unselfish love. As the writer to the Hebrews put it, ". . . as it is they (Christians) desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

It does not matter that secular man cannot accept this view of history. He cannot, whatever his doctrines of history may be, remain impervious to those Christians at work in the world which is not their final destination, which is not their home or their city. In brief, secular man's service to the world can never rise above the level of enlightened self-interest. He is trying to improve and possibly save the only world he knows and the only world he thinks he has. But the world is too powerfully entrenched in the evil of its own making to be cured by enlightened self-interest. Perhaps the Christian, who serves it without such motives, is best equipped to deal with it and to bring it to heel before the power of God.

In the third place, the Christian who works in the world — always in the name of Jesus and never sloughing off that testimonial — can be the only effective intercessor for the society he serves. Remember that foreboding caution in Matthew 10: "Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." The unexamined assumption that this refers only to loyalty to Christ when under duress and persecution needs greater examination. To be sure, we must acknowledge that this note is there. However, these words come at the end of a chapter dealing with the sending out of the twelve on a mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It has to do with proclaiming the advent of the kingdom of God. Jesus knew that the disciples would suffer rejection and persecution. And he must have been anticipating defection as a result. But he cautioned

that if one denied him to those who rejected the gospel, the gospel-er could not intercede for those who had rejected it.

What does the servant of the world do when the world rejects his servanthood? He does nothing but wring his hands unless he has recourse to power that the world does not know. The Christian is empowered to bring the world to God in worship and in prayer, to intercede for the fallen world. But it is the prayers of a righteous man which avail. One who has denied the Christ or been silent about him is in no position to make that kind of righteous intercession. Praying for the world here and now is the plus which those who only serve the world out there cannot accomplish.

If these are good and sufficient indications of the difference between Christian servanthood and that which is not Christian, let us then decide on a manifesto of our servanthood with which we will work in the world. Let it be to us a mandate, a modern decalogue of manifestoes.

As it was before, our modern decalogue accentuates the negative rather than the positive. For any man is freer if he must obey negative mandates rather than positive ones. When one is told what to do, that is the only recourse he has. When he is told what not to do, every other option is open to him except for that single restriction. So our law does not bind the Christian overly much. It becomes the level of his conscience to set over against the level of tolerance by which the world is willing to accept him. In other words, let us say that we will serve the world under these conditions. For without these conditions, it is not possible for us to serve it in any meaningful way.

Here is our manifesto:

Thou shalt not substitute love for the Lord Thy God. It is he who has called us to mission. We love because he first loved us. Thou shalt not substitute Professor Jesus for the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The world is not redeemed by its knowledge but by the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Thou shalt not judge God by what is good but judge goodness by the measure of God. For only God is good.

Thou shalt not call attention to your virtue but call attention to your faith. It is better for the world to know the gospel than for it to know good men.

Thou shalt not urge a person to take Christ into his heart but call him to be in Christ. The body of Christ, which is the church, is more constant and trustworthy than the human heart.

Thou shalt not wait for the world to involve you but shall go in mission as one sent from God.

Thou shalt not forsake the relevance of the gospel for human speculations about the needs of the world.

Thou shalt not relinquish the fatherhood of God in a world "come of age." It is a boastful adolescent rebelling against the father. Rejoice that you have been given power to become the children of God.

Thou shalt not commit the Word to instincts and feelings but shall give it substance in language and deed.

Thou shalt not envy the person who is doing his own thing, for you have been called to do the will of God through Christ who is Lord.

# Words From An Angry Bible Believer

June 15, 1980

*Isaiah 55:1-9; Philippians 3:2-16*

Forget that sermon title you see in the bulletin. I am much too angry to think, much less preach, about it. If you must have a title, you may call this sermon, "Words From an Angry Bible-Believer." However, for reasons which are beyond me, I have found no necessity for changing my scripture selections. I believe they authenticate the sermon.

As to my anger, I am angry enough to hope that as few people as possible are aware that I have even had anything to do with the Southern Baptist Convention or the National Council of Churches. That certainly covers a lot of ground between two extremes. But my ire is directed at both of them, because each body, in its own way, has wrested the Bible from the Church and exploited it for the purposes of each organization.

This week the Southern Baptist Convention has passed a resolution declaring the Bible to be inerrant and urging that no person shall be employed on the faculty of our seminaries who does not believe in the doctrine of inerrancy. So it is that the Southern Baptist Convention has determined what is the word of God by a majority vote of its registered messengers and others who may have sneaked in.

This past week the National Council of Churches has called for yet another revision of the Bible, but this time with a mind to removing all so-called sexist language from its pages without regard, it may be supposed, for the text.

However far apart these two bodies may be in their theology, they are as one with a common purpose. They mean to exploit the Bible for their own purpose instead of for the glory of God, the teaching of the church, and the proclamation of the Gospel. In other words, inerrancy and feminism are their concerns more than the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I do not wish to spend too much time arguing the case against either of them. However, in order to give some credibility to my position, it is necessary for me first to ask the latest Southern Baptist Convention the question: Who killed Goliath? We are familiar with I Samuel's account, in the seventeenth chapter, which tells us that David did it with his sling shot. But II Samuel 21:19 reads, "And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob; and Elhanan the son of Jaareoregim, slew Goliath the Gittite." Then I Chronicles 20:5 reads, "And there was again war with the Philistines; and Elhanan the son of Jair slew Lahmi the brother of Goliath the Gittite." To add to our confusion, both II Samuel and I Chronicles tell us that Elhanan was neither the son of Jair or Jaareoregim but of Dodo of Bethlehem.

If by any chance you are not tired of the question who killed Goliath? please permit me to ask you another, What people in Winston-Salem are consistently engaged in defying the prophecy of Joel? Now, we can answer this second question with more alacrity and greater assurance. The answer is every travel agency which organizes tours to Jerusalem. It is in the prophecy of Joel that no stranger shall ever pass through Jerusalem after his prophecy has been made:

So you shall know that I am the Lord your God  
who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain.  
And Jerusalem shall be holy  
and strangers shall never pass through it again.

Enough of the case. What is apparent is that the scriptures we have now are not inerrant and without mistake. Furthermore, if the inerrancy of the scripture is as indispensable as the Southern Baptist Convention claims it to be, one of two things must be assumed. Either God loved the original authors of the scriptures more than he does later translators and therefore gave them the Bible in such a way as to make it impossible for them to make a mistake, or the matter just got out of his hands. It may also be supposed that if God

wanted the Bible to be inerrant, as once it supposedly was, he has more than a gaggle of brilliant Southern Baptist fundamentalists who would be more than happy to write an inerrant Bible if he would only give the word.

But enough of Southern Baptists for the moment, let us look to that enlightened group, the National Council of Churches. The National Council wants to remove sexist language from the scriptures because such language is offensive and discriminatory. If the National Council gets its way, we shall be praying "Our parent, who are in heaven" and "in the name of the Parent, Child, and Holy Neuter. I think I would prefer to pray in the name of Mother, Daughter and Holy Spirit, than in the name of Parent, Child, and Holy It. Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi will read, "You are the Christ, the child of the living Parent," making us wonder which one died, and Jesus will reply, "My parent has revealed this to you."

Now if the so-called sexist language in the scripture was intended to discriminate against women and to be used to their disadvantage, would it not be reasonable to suppose that the Devil or Satan would be referred to as *she* and *her*? This is not the case. Without exception so far as I have been able to determine, the personal pronoun for Satan and Devil is masculine.

God is known as Father in the Old and the New Testament. But it was Jesus, who was a man, who was a son of someone, who is known as the son of Mary, who called God Father. And we may suppose that among the reasons that Jesus called God Father is to make the same point that the writers of scripture were making when they wrote of the Virgin Birth, which was not a testimony to a biological miracle but to the fact that God, rather than Joseph, was the Father of Jesus Christ.

It is also to be understood that since we are created male or female, then the incarnation had to be in one sex or the other. Since the incarnation took the form of the male, it is not strained for Jesus to be the Son and God to be Father.

I am now prepared to call upon the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Council of Churches to give the Bible back to the church, particularly in its local and congregational nature, where preaching is done and worship practiced. The Southern Baptist Convention, a three day meeting of vacationers, heresy hunters, power brokers, little preachers trying to brush against the big boys,

all together making up a religious mob, is simply not competent to discuss the Bible, to determine its nature, to interpret it, or to proclaim it.

I am sure that the national Council of Churches is more deliberative than the Southern Baptist Convention, but it too is disqualified on more than one count as being a competent body by which to deal with scripture.

Both of these bodies have portrayed a lack of reverence for the scriptures and are seemingly not in agreement with the probability that the ways and thoughts of God are higher than the ways and thoughts of men. And they are not willing to believe that the word which goes forth from the mouth of God, shall not return unto him empty but shall accomplish that which He purposed for it and that it will prosper in the thing for which it was sent. They are deciding what that word shall be, what it shall accomplish and where and how it will prosper.

Against that kind of arrogance I take personal exception and accuse the convention and the council of insulting me both as a person and regarding my profession. I am insulted as a person because I believe, with Edwin Lewis, who was writing back in the '50's, that "it is no light thing to be set aside as a preacher of the Word and to accept the responsibility of being an interpreter of God to men." The suggestion that since I do not believe in inerrancy and the suggestion that since I do not take exception to the masculine pronoun for God, made by the convention and council, that I am thereby either unfit for ministry in the convention's eyes or remiss in ministry in the council's eyes strike me as personal insults.

I am professionally insulted because these bodies are doing what is best and most appropriately done in the church at worship, between the congregation and its preacher.

Edwin Lewis has written, "The Bible is the most important possession of the church, more important even than all of its vast material resources combined." I believe this to be the case.

It is with some hesitation, for fear of being misunderstood, that I also believe with Lewis, I cannot believe otherwise and be a responsible man, that the "preacher, as the interpreter of the Bible, is the most important figure in the Christian Church."

And most importantly I believe with Lewis that the "interpreter-preacher and the Bible are not to be separated." They are the mutua-

lities of the Church. Now let it therefore be said and settled for that the truth about the Bible is more likely to be said and heard when it is preached from a pulpit, addressing a people with God's word for their lives. This is not to abjure the value of scholarship nor its great contribution to the understanding of the Bible, but I find it unsettling that so many young seminarians, just out of school, are so intimidated by what their professors have said about one text or another that they are not free to preach from scripture as they should be. This is not so much the fault of the professor as it is the preacher. And I am afraid that in most cases this is true of the preacher because he or she would rather be a professor.

This is not the case for me. I am glad to be what I am, a preacher, a Bible-believer, seeking to proclaim the Word in faithfulness to the scripture. And I not only believe that the preacher is best qualified to do this, I believe that you as a worshipping congregation is best prepared to know whether or not the gospel is being proclaimed.

Now you may not know the difference between a chiasmus and a keyhole. You may think that hermeneutics is the practice or the study of hermitism. And you may be badly lacking in skill with Greek or Hebrew, but when you worship and the word is opened to you the the Spirit does its work, then you may rest assured that you will be the best recognizer of the Word.

So I say again, the Bible must be returned to the church, and if not returned by such councils and conventions which have stolen it away, it must be wrested from such bodies by the means which God allows.

The doctrine of inerrancy is garbage, but unlike Paul, the Southern Baptist Convention does not know itself as he did. He was a Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrews, blameless before the law. And he said, this I treat as refuse for the sake of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. Now so many of the leaders of the Southern Baptist Conventions are Pharisees, they are Baptists of the Baptists, and they are so right in their own eyes about so many things. And this they cling to, pridefully calling their brethren unbelievers and unfit because they do not agree with the self-righteousness. They do not even know how much garbage they treasure which keeps them from putting the knowledge of Christ central in their lives. And I must say the same for the doctrines of feminism. If they are put above the knowledge of Christ, if this is secondary to cause of feminism, then

the cause of feminism is garbage, and the National Council of Churches is trafficking in garbage.

So I would covenant with you that we will spend some time and effort, and most of all much faith, in regaining the Bible for the church and its pulpit. What this will cost us in the days ahead is not yet clear, but whatever it costs it must be done. For conventions and councils, without any question, are now convinced that they are God's special people to the world. They are not churches, but they purport to be churches. They are not the body of Christ, but they would have it believed that they are. Now, for our own integrity and the sake of God, we must not let these matters go by unnoticed. And I assure you that if you are wondering why I am talking about the Bible when there are so many other important issues in the world — I assure you that you have missed the point, because the whole of human history is focused in this word.

# Who Slammed The Door to Noah's Ark?

March 16, 1980

*Romans 5:13-25; Genesis 7:11-16*

Who slammed the door to Noah's ark? Who shut it up watertight against the raging flood? Who fastened that door against the remainder of the animals and the people, when the quota of two by two had been realized? Who left the rest to die by drowning?

It surely was not the ones already knee deep in the impending watery doom. Perhaps, as legend has it, they had mocked Noah during his long and lonely days as a gloomy and solitary ship-builder. But their teasing must have turned to terror when they were caught by the quota and realized that they were not on the list of passengers. Perhaps they hoped, with a hope only born of desperation, that they might rush on board at the last moment. Perhaps the animals were poised to slip catlike, to sneak through a door but barely ajar. They were now at the place where any old ship would do in the storm. But the door was slammed in their faces. Everything on earth was blotted out. They never made it. They died by drowning.

Who shut the door? It is for sure that the flood's victims did not. Neither did Noah and that is a fact which merits our attention for what it is worth.

If the doomed did not, if Noah did not, who slammed the door shut? Let me tell you who did it. The same one who banished Adam and Eve from Eden for poaching on forbidden fruit, that is who did it. The same one who, without any good or apparent reason, chose between the sacrifices of Cain and Abel — a choice which led to Abel's death at the hand of his brother — that is who

did it. The same one who sent the terrible flood in the first place, that is who did it. The same one who, when faced with the corporate pride of a unified humanity, confounded the builders of Babel's tower, and shattered humankind by splintering its language. The same one who sent the death angel to the Egyptians, and later crushed them in the clapping hands of the Red Sea, that is who did it. The same one who later brought Israel into the days of their exile, that is who did it.

He was the one of whom the psalmist chanted, "How terrible are thy deeds. . . . he is terrible in his deeds among men." The words leap at us from the scripture's account of the event of the flood. After Noah and his divinely ordered quota were on board the ark, the scripture says, "And the Lord shut him in." It was God. And when the Lord shut Noah in, he simultaneously shut everyone else out. It was God, the one mighty and terrible God, who slammed the door shut and sealed the fate of those who were left out.

Now to be sure many rationalizations have been offered whereby we do not have to blame God for the terror of that time. Most attempts at historicizing the flood have been exercises in futility and give us hope that it never happened. Many archeologists have journeyed to Ararat only to leave in disappointment having found not the slightest trace of the ark. And so the chance that the story is a myth, without historical foundation, has allowed some people to say that since there may have been no flood, then it is not necessary to ask why a good God would have created such a monstrous death by drowning.

But there is one matter which cannot be treated by scientific inquiry or by digging in the ruins of Ararat; that is the fact that the author of this story states without condition or explanation that God shut the door. So it does not matter, does it, whether the account is factual or not. What we must deal with is that the writer had no qualms in leaving with us his assumption that God slammed shut the door.

Let those who are so inclined argue at will as to whether or not the writer had his facts straight about the flood. But, in the situation, this matter is not nearly as important as is the writer's interpretation of God. In other words, the factuality of the flood is not as significant as is the question as to whether or not God is the kind of God who would shut the door to the ark. And the question persists

until we are forced to ask, Is the God who shut the ark's door the same God we know in Jesus Christ? May we not agree that the nature and acts of God are more important than the literal fact of the flood?

Before we organize a safari to hunt down an answer, it may be that by raising and answering a question or two about Noah, we will be able to forego any such expedition. For example, what kind of man was Noah? Why was he not like Abraham or Jonah, a tragic hero type, ready and willing to die for others? Why did Noah, if he were a righteous man, not offer to step aside and die in the flood while giving his place on the ark to a feeble old person or a helpless infant? One answer is that when God is working out his will in history, tragic and sacrificial heroes seem only to get in the way. What God wanted to effect on Mount Moriah would not have come to pass if he had allowed Abraham to die in the place of his son, Isaac. God was calling for obedient faith rather than heroism in that instance. And although we seldom think of Jonah as a hero, he tried very hard to be one. God wanted Jonah to preach in Nineveh so that the citizens of that city would repent and be spared. Jonah preferred to be a hero, and when the tempest caught the ship, on which he was fleeing from God's orders, Jonah asked that he be thrown overboard so that the lives of the sailors might be spared. But God was looking for a preacher, not a hero, at that time. So the fish carried Jonah to the shore, and when he had deposited him there, God told Jonah, "Go to Nineveh and preach."

If then there were no places in God's scenario for heroes, in Noah's time, why did not Noah shut the door instead of God? He had done everything which God had ordered up until that time; why did he not shut the door? Was it not perhaps because he could not bring himself to do so terrible a thing?

Noah's last days were anything but glorious ones. The record tells us that he got drunk after the flood. Some have speculated that he did so because of the letdown after these venturesome days of riding out the flood. The aftermath could have been sheer boredom for this doughty ship's captain. Or it may have been that he became a well-to-do vinegrower and the success went to his head along with the wine. Others wonder if he were not trying to forget those awful cooped-up days aboard the ship. Perhaps he suffered as much as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. But so long as we are

supposing, why not speculate that he got drunk because every time he tried to sleep, he remembered his neighbors whom he had left to die? That would be enough to make drunks out of many of us.

If this is at all a clue, then we may surmise that Noah did not shut the ark's door because God did not ask him to shut it. Perhaps God would not even have permitted him to do so. God is responsible for his judgments and shows his love, even in the midst of them, by always doing the hardest things there are to do in bringing his judgment and will to pass.

It needs to occur to us, if it has not already done so, that our questions as to how a good God can allow evil to exist and happen in the world need possibly to be reworded. Then we might ask, "Why does God always do the hardest things which pertain to the problems of sin, suffering, evil, and death?"

We often would make it easier for God and ourselves in matters pertaining to the mystery of sin, suffering and death. Richard John Neuhaus tells of visiting with a bereaved family, whose pastor had shared with the distraught members his understanding about the stages of grief outlined in the writings of Kubler-Ross and others of like ilk. The family members discussed among themselves these various episodes of grief. There was little wonder and less outrage. There were no religious questions. Newhaus says, "It was clinical. It was awful."

This antiseptic treatment of tragedy may make it easier for us and for God, because we never raise the question why. We are not forced to wonder about God's goodness or about whether our own sinfulness had a causal relationship to tragedy and grief. Even if there is little likelihood that one can find the answers to such questions, they are ones deserving to be asked. The end result of all such inquiry is to say, "what has transpired is according to God's will." Then it is that we realize that, although evil is a mystery beyond our rational explanation, God is the one who chooses to tackle the toughest decisions and do the hardest things.

Jesus knew this to be the case. He would have in no way disagreed with Paul's splendid witness, that the God who slammed the door to Noah's ark is the same one "who shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Christ would underscore the testimony that "while we here [his] enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son," and that "much

more, now that we are reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." Or that as one man's trespass led to condemnation, one man's act of righteousness led to acquittal and life. The one who shut Noah in, and the rest out, is the one "who so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

That was surely the hardest thing that God has ever taken upon himself to do. And the apparent harshness of the decision was of such a nature as to cause the Christ to cry a cry of dereliction, when nailed to the cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

How is it that we recoil from the suggestion that the death of one of our beloved occurred within the will of God, when we have been told over and over again that the death of God's begotten, at whose baptism came the words shooting from the sky, "This is my beloved Son," was within the will of God? The cross did not take place outside the will of God; it did not transpire without his notice, knowledge, and confirmation. Jesus knew that this was the way it was to be. He understood that the cross, either without or against the will of God, would have been a meaningless tragedy, marked perhaps by heroism but empty of redemptive power. Is this not the reason he went from the supper to the garden, and there he prayed, "Not my will but thine be done." I do not think that the Gethsemane prayer was an effort to gain some last-minute reprieve. And it was not the prayer of an immature young adult still asking "Daddy" what he ought to do. It was rather designed to place the responsibility for the cross, where it belonged — where it could only belong — that is, in the mind and will of God.

And this has been given to us as the good news, that because of the cross, even if we die, we shall live again. And thus we are saved, not from the mortician's ministrations any more than were those others saved from the ravages of the flood. What really matters is not how or when or why we and others die, but that we are saved for life eternal. And the one who shut the door to Noah's ark, and who shut the door on all other options for a praying Son in Gethsemane, is the one who has opened the door to the kingdom of heaven. And in opening that door, he had to do the hardest thing of all.



# Love and Taking Orders

*September 11, 1977*

*Deuteronomy 7:6-11; John 14:15-24*

I must not allow another person to love me unless I am open to the possibility that he or she may make some changes in my life. Anyone who likes things just the way they are and oneself just as he is ought to avoid being loved.

In a religious sense, especially the Judeo-Christian sense, to be loved by God is to allow him to give orders to those he loves. So it is that Deuteronomy leaves Israel with this reminder, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping an oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments."

These verses are replete with love's will and power to change and order the life of the beloved. Israel's situation is changed in that it is delivered from bondage. Its people are redeemed, restored, saved. But such love demands that Israel know that its God is God and that to respond to his love with love is to keep his commandments. All of this moves me to say again, if you do not wish for things to be changed, stay away from love because it usually has change on its mind.

Love even thinks it has some authority to change or affect the life of its object. So far as the divine love is concerned, it is inseparable

from commandment. The God who loves us gives us commandments and expects our response to be one of obedience. Nor may we assume, as we are inclined to do, that Jesus' message was different. All this is a more gentle and tender Son of the Father.

In the Fourth Gospel, Christ is quite forthright about his expectations: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments . . . He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me, . . ." That is incredibly clear, is it not? A loving Christ gives commandments and assumes that love in return will take the form of obedience. Therefore, one must not expect to be loved by Christ without being ordered, saved, redeemed, and altered in some way.

Modern people, whether Christian or not, tend to assume that although this is the nature of divine love, love between people, that is between their own kind, is radically different from the love which goes on between God and man. As a matter of fact, we are uncomfortable with, and appalled by, the faintest suggestion that love of one person for another — parents, children, mates, friends — will make for changes, alteration, guidance, and correction in the lives of those who are loved.

I am convinced that there is no absolutely radical difference between God's love for a person and the love that two persons share. Human love, if it is to be genuine, must partake somewhat of the nature of the divine. I must admit that there is no indication in our favorite scripture on love that love intrudes, makes demands, orders, and changes one's life. However, we need to remember that Paul's hymn on love in I Corinthians 13 was in answer to the specific problems of the Corinthian church. The people of that church were claiming their superiority over each other, spiritually speaking, because of the supposed superiority of their gifts from God, especially the gift of tongues. Paul said that love, almost any kind of love, was better than that kind of bickering. We should not lift the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians out of its context and make of it a general treatise on love. Furthermore, let me speak a heresy — at least once: Christians ought to be able to think together about love, having gleaned the scriptures for help, without so much as resorting in any way whatsoever to I Corinthians 13. Although it may be superior in style, it is no match for the gospel of John or the First Epistle of John with respect to a definition of love.

The First Epistle of John firmly puts to rest any notion that human love has absolutely nothing in common with divine love. The writer insists that "we love because he (God) first loved us." This is to suggest that our love is both motivated and enabled by the fact that we are initially loved by God. If God is necessary to our capability to love, he is also involved in the manner and fashion of the way we love.

Furthermore, in the fourth chapter of the First Epistle of John one may read, "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." Why is such a person considered to be a liar? Is it because it is conceptually and psychologically impossible to love God without loving one's brother? Although, it is tempting to place some such interpretation on the passage, the context indicates something else. The chapter closes on this note: "And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also." One who claims to love God but does not love his brother is a liar because he has failed to keep God's commandment and this is proof that he does not love God. If it were impossible, by nature, to love God while failing to love one's brother, there would be no need for a commandment that we should love our brother as well as loving God.

Once again, therefore, love is couched in commandment. And although this is not exactly the same with human love as it is with divine love, the former is a modification of the latter rather than being something radically other. Because no person is God, his love for another cannot command. But his love for another is characterized by suggestion, by some intrusion, and by having something to do with the shape and nature of the one whom he loves.

If I sense the modern mood, in almost any kind of relationship, marriage, parenthood, sibling status with parents, and with one another, friendship, relation between persons and institutions, the kind of love which has been defined heretofore is apt to be shoved aside for another kind of love. It seems as if most of us, although wanting to be loved perhaps as much as ever, want love which does not meddle, does not claim, does not suggest, does not demand, does not interfere, intrude, or encroach, does not correct, does not guide, and (I am afraid) also does not care.

The love to which I am now referring comes close to defying

definition. It is most difficult to speak of it metaphorically or to find appropriate analogies. Although it tends to have some characteristics of idolatry, it cannot be this, because we form the idols we adore and worship, and the new kind of love will have no part in the object of love being shaped by the one who loves.

In my confusion, therefore, I am reduced to describing the current kind of love by use of some illustrative and fairly personal cases.

Some years back we were baby-sitting a dog for one of our children. I cannot say that I passionately loved that dog. In fact, before my experience with him was through, I was committed to reversing the popular adage to the extent of insisting that "dog's best friend is a man." In any case, I built an enclosure at some considerable expense with my customary expertise, which is next to nothing. One day, while trying to escape his confinement, the dog caught his hind legs in the wire at the top of the pen and I found him with his tail pointing to the heavens while his front feet could barely touch the ground. Naturally, as I tried to free him, a hapless victim in a spider's web, he tried to bite me each time I added to his fright or caused him a little pain.

I would judge that I had saved that dog because I did care for him. And by caring for him this much — call it love if you insist — I could not let the matter stand as it was. I bought more wire and supports in order to raise the level of the enclosure and make it more secure. Then too, the next time I saw the dog trying to escape, I delivered a few well placed licks in order to discourage his foolhardiness.

If I understand the modern definition of love, it was love which prompted me to save the dog, but my deeds of strengthening the restraints about him and disciplining him were not love but domination. I had been guilty of intrusion, of meddling in the affairs of the loved one, of trying to make him what I wanted him to be rather than allowing him to be himself.

Transferring to the case of children, this would mean that one should rush to save the child from being run down by an automobile, but should not teach the child to stay out of the street, build a fence perhaps to make sure, or discipline the child if he should be stubborn or unheeding about the matter.

Assuredly I am being ridiculous. Of course, we must protect our dogs and our children from harm, because in their innocence, they know not how to care for themselves. I admit to being ridiculous in order to point out how ludicrous others are in insisting that when the object of love is neither a beast or a little child, but an adolescent or above in years, these elements of protecting, caring, shaping, trying to assure the safety and welfare of others should immediately be excised for what we call love. That is impossible to do. The more mature and self-reliant the loved one is, the more we can and should resist undue shaping and influencing of the loved one's life. But this is not the point; the point is that love, if it is anything, is something which invests in the life of another, establishes a beachhead on his emotions, and does indeed intrude into one's life.

A second case is of a wife, who feeling ignored by her husband, confessed to him as she drove him to the airport so he might fly to an engagement in another city, that a mutual friend of theirs was showing some interest in her. Due to his husbandly inattentiveness, she was afraid that she might respond to the man's overtures. Then she said as they pulled into the airport parking ground, "But I do not want the other man to love me and I do not want to love him, I want you to love me and I want to love you." To which the husband replied, "I know that," and he got on the plane and flew to more important business. I should think that this woman was not only trying to use her love for her husband in order to demand something from him, but she was crying out for the assurance that his love for her was of sufficient stature to demand something of her. But since he did not suggest, much less command, fidelity, she properly interpreted that he did not really love her. They are no longer husband and wife.

Finally, I had a friend whom I loved and who loved me. Fellow ministers, we used to stand together against the blandishments of the fundamentalists. We spent hours arguing theology, demanding of each other that we be the best clergymen possible, our devotion causing us to criticize each other's sermons, and books, and professional style. We ate with relish in big-city restaurants, lolled on the beaches together, and looked forward to vacation time when we could gripe with and at one another about ministry, church, and life in general.

Now my friend has drifted out of this. He is no longer the keen New Testament scholar that once he was. He jeers at the church. He has found other interests. But we do not try any longer to change each other. I neither try to pull him back to the church, which is so dear to me, he no longer tries to pull me out of it. I still love him. I would extricate him as once I did from the ocean. But then I could scold him for floating half-asleep to what seemed to be a middle point in the Atlantic. We no longer scold. We no longer argue. We no longer intrude. We are no longer friends.

Let me confess to my wife, my children, my in-laws, my colleagues, my friends, my beloved congregation, I do not know how to love any of you if I cannot invest in your lives, butting in, suggesting, shaping, criticizing, asking questions.

And please, family, friends, congregation, if you love me, keep those nosy questions and suggestions coming in. I am an adult. I have some maturity. I am somewhat my own person. I will often make up my own mind.

But if you love me prove it by asking and suggesting: Where have you been? Who's your friend? Don't you think you ought to see a doctor? Don't you have enough sense to come in out of the rain? Your telephone personality, as well as the rest of it, could use a little work. Are you going to wear that tie with that shirt? Squash is good for you whether you like it or not. I am praying for you. Whatever possessed you to preach such a silly sermon? When was the last time you prayed? And have you been filled with the spirit?

# Tragic Outcomes From Broken Promises

*July 15, 1984*

*I Kings 8:54-61; Hebrews 11: 13-16, 39-40*

Broken promises breed both cynicism and despair, profoundly and in large numbers. Tragic outcomes they are and made all the more so because they do not immediately reveal themselves, do not easily identify themselves as cynicism or despair. With the cynic, it is a matter of image. The cynic refrigerates anger, deposits disappointment in the deep freeze, ices the emotions so as not to appear bitter or shocked with the lies which lacerate one's soul and one's being.

Despair is even worse and even less likely to give any sense of its existence. Whereas the cynic is dealing with image, the despairing person is dealing with the reality of hopelessness. Despairing people do not even cry out. I do not know exactly what is meant by that phrase "cry of despair" or "voices of despair." People who cry out, even if in danger of drowning, still have their heads above the water. Psychologically and emotionally speaking, if a despairing one cries out, it would be only to fill the lungs and to drown.

All the more tragic they are because they are not easily seen in individuals or in the society as a whole. Cynicism and despair are no more evident to the eye than they are to the ear, except for the possible fact that there are ugly creases in the fabric of society like the furrowed brow of a countenance. But even those creases appear to belong, like seersucker, though having been pinched into painful pockers; they are more or less the style of the time.

We are so accustomed to the litter of fragmented vows, so inured to promises broken, that we can move through the houses of mod-

ern culture and never notice the dishelvelment or the seediness of the distress. I think that is tragic, for I believe that we are a cynical and despairing people in today's world, cynical and despairing to a great extent because of promises and vows made and broken. I am trying today to call your attention to the incidence and the nature of the unkept vow, so that we may get a better reading on the damage that it does when we break promises to others and of the damage others do to us when they do not keep their vows with us. So look at the litter, if you will, however unpleasant it may be. Do not avoid the debris, but take account of it.

It may help if we understand that cynicism is the result of one kind of broken promise, while despair is the result of another. Cynicism, for the most part, comes from promises based on deliberate lies, in the full awareness of those who make them that they are lies. I would suggest that this is what happens to households and breeds a kind of cynicism that is not absolutely destructive but at least illustrative. When did the child tell the last lie about TV, that as soon as I can see this favorite show of mine, I will get to my homework, I will clean up the room? It couldn't have been longer ago than last night. When is the last time that the man of the house lied about the garbage, or the women about sewing buttons? It goes on and on: promises, promises, promises which nobody intends to keep. Ultimately, there is the kind of cynicism which doesn't take the promise seriously.

These are vignettes of a larger scene, vignettes of the kind of cynicism and despair which operates in corporate society. Corporate cynicism is brought on because of the broken promises, based on lies, that are issued by our social institutions, our corporate structures.

Business: business, particularly by use of commercials, usually lies and knows that it is doing so. Now that is no shock to you, is it? What about the church? As an institution in today's world, no institution is breaking more promises and knowing that it is going to when it makes them than the church. The first doesn't shock you; I hope the second will make it hard for your apathy to survive. The church is a liar.

As for business, your automobile burns more gas than was promised; that is for sure. I doubt that there is a single exception in this

room to that reality. And be sure of this, if you are having trouble with your spouse, reconciliation will not come over a cup of coffee, regardless of the brand. Communication gaps between father and son are not likely to be bridged by conversations over deodorants. Beer drinkers are more likely to argue about darts than about low calories and great taste. And whoever heard, in the modern age, of a son who didn't have a home computer going off to college on a train? The reason the boy doesn't have a home computer is because the parents are still paying for the Porsche. These are lies; everybody knows they are lies.

Religious commercials are no less misleading and altogether more dangerous. If you can stand it, tune in on the church on the airways today. Tune in. The man tells you that if you don't send him \$500,000 dollars in the next half day, he will be off the air. But, just as sure as shooting, you tune in and he's still there. One dear man said, "The wind blew over my antenna, and I can no longer proclaim the Lord's Word, unless I get my antenna back. I need \$350,000 or so for my antenna." It was insured. Getting yourself born again will not guarantee happiness. Christian social action will not solve all the world's problems. Tithing won't make you one cent wealthier. Relevance is not the ultimate religious test. Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schafly are not the new Adam and Eve, redeemed to bring the new humanity into the twenty-first century. Lies, and everybody knows it.

Church after church — not only electronically, church after church lies. Do you realize that we now are in a time when people are suing the church for lying to them? People are suing the pulpit because the pulpit said, if you do this and you do that, you do this and you do that, you won't be sick any more. You will be absolutely happy, your home will be Eden, and you won't even grow warts. Cynicism is the result.

Despair is the result of promises broken because the promisers cannot deliver what they promised due to their impotence. You know that to be true of government, do you not? As we gear up for the conventions, you know that to be true of government. But I fear that it is also true of educational enterprises, particularly at the level of the academy, a place like this. The academy is the most honest place that I know. The academy has greater integrity than

the church, so far as institutions are concerned. Mark that: the academy has greater integrity than the church, on the average. The academy makes promises which it cannot deliver because of its impotence and because of its prejudice. Hear this: "Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life." Indeed.

This is Humanist Manifesto II but it comports with the best educational ideas. If using technology wisely will eliminate selfishness, then it will eliminate poverty. But I have seen no evidence whatsoever that technology has done anything about selfishness. Those kinds of promises do not take account of the human condition.

One of my dear friends of yesteryear is now president of a very prestigious college. Making a speech here some years back, he said that he did not understand — that that very fine institution taught all its students virtue and the value of life. Not a single virtue, not a single social responsibility was left out in the teaching and training of that student body. But, said the president, when they get out into the world, they forget all of their social responsibility. He didn't understand it, nor did he appreciate too much my remark that if he still believed in Original Sin the way he had when he started out, he would understand the problem much more clearly.

But it is not only impotence; it is prejudice. The academy is not as prejudiced against minorities or against the poor as are other institutions. The academy has only one prejudice: it is prejudiced against ignorance and the ignorant and the unlettered out there. The more specialized the academy becomes, the less it hears the needy calls from the community. If you think that I am being too harsh, let us take one example from very close to home. Some of our faculty people, some who are members of this church and some who are not, are teaching the prisoners over at the Cherry Street facility right around the corner. Said one of the prison officials to one of those faculty members not long ago, "I am so surprised that you are here, that a Wake Forest professor would be doing this. That

is not the image of Wake Forest that Winston-Salem has." Listen: the academy probably — anywhere, not just here — the academy probably has less effect upon its most immediate environment, particularly in the short run, than does any institution in our society. If you don't believe that, Wake Forest has been here thirty years. Go to civic clubs or other kinds of clubs. Listen to the programs.

In order to be honest, I think I ought to talk about the religious academy, because it is in the same boat: it has a prejudice against the masses. I am distressed to learn that Southeastern Seminary down in the town of Wake Forest no longer requires a single course in homiletics and therefore takes no official responsibility for communicating to the masses the word over which it ponders within the faculty and the elite.

Government? We know. But, you see, I don't think the government lies. I think the government and politicians really believe — really believe in everything from trickle-down economics to cutting the national deficit in half. President Reagan promised to decrease the national deficit. I think he was sincere, but he didn't do it. Mr. Mondale says if we put him in there, he will save Social Security from bankruptcy without reducing a single benefit. We old folks, especially, would like to see him do that. The people who are running for election, some of them, will be fortunate in that they won't win and therefore they don't have to keep their promises. And those who do win can blame it on astronomy, ecology, hurricanes, unforeseen disasters, which made them impotent.

Now, beloved all that I am concerned with today, in the first place at least, in the most certain place, is the church, and the church doesn't have to lie, if it will quit being super-church. How big was Oral Roberts's Jesus? Was it nine hundred feet? All we need to do is present a life-size incarnation of the Word. All we need to do is to quit promising what the church can do. Maybe the church lies because it knows it's impotent when it tries to be all things to all people. And it is important for the sake of this sermon that I not deal in glibness. You heard from Kings that testimony of King Solomon. After a prayer of dedication for the House of the Lord which he's built, a temple, and a prayer of intercession it was also for the people, when he closed the prayer, he lifted his hands over

all of Israel and blessed them and then said, "The Lord has not broken his promise by a single word." Now that's glib. That is not what is prevalent in scripture. It is a good thing Solomon didn't live long enough to meet Jeremiah, because Jeremiah said, "I curse the day I was born. I would have tripped the man who carried the news of my birth if I could have." And then he said, "Now, God, will you tell me why you are like a deceitful brook to me, like waters that fail?" Jeremiah dared to say of Yahweh what Job would only say about his friends: "Dried up streams, promising much and delivering little." Jeremiah, in the first of that book, compared Yahweh with a fountain of never-failing water, but now the times are tough and he says, "God, are you really a crook? Are you really a crook?"

Now in all these instances, you never find Yahweh or the God of Christ defending oneself — never. God said back, in effect, "Well, if you cannot stand up in a slight breeze, what are you going to do when the wind blows? If you can't keep your feet in a dry streambed with no water, what are you going to do when it gets full and rushing?" He said, "Jeremiah, you keep on with proclamation and you will be as my mouth, and I will make you as a fortified bronze wall to the people." Do you hear what God does to us? Whenever we scream at him for breaking his promise, he doesn't tell us whether he kept his promise or not; he simply says, "Go to work." Every time one says to God, "You've broken your promise," God says, "Test your faith."

That is nowhere more beautifully and dramatically spelled out than in this letter to the Hebrews. The eleventh chapter starts off with: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Then the author lists Abel, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, and Moses — people of great faith — and he says every one of them "did not receive what was promised." Do you see the fairness of that; do you see the truth of that? They died in faith. They died in faith, never having received what was promised. And he concludes this chapter by saying, "And all these, though well-attested by faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect."

Do you know what happens then? "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside

every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Here's the bottom line: faith does not raise the question of promise. Faith endures, which means that the very promise of God does rest upon the steadfast faith of the people, so that those who do not receive what was promised might find their perfection in us, but that perfection is not that we have received what is promised; that perfection is that, in the cloud of witnesses, we run the race. Amen.



# Advent and Confession

*November 28, 1971*

*Luke 2:8-14*

The last two stanzas of Bertolt Brecht's "Great Hymn of Thanksgiving" go like this:

"Honestly praise the poor memory of heaven  
and the fact that it neither  
knows your name nor your face,  
nobody knows that you're still here.  
Praise the cold, the darkness, the corruptional  
Look and see,  
Nothing depends on you;  
you can die without a care."

Looked at from a philosophical perspective, this would appear to be a dreadful existence. Looked at experientially, this seems, at the first layer, to be exactly what man wants. Not to have his name written in heaven is his final escape from responsibility. Since nothing depends on him and no one knows his face or his presence, he is able to die without a care.

Heaven's poor memory has forgotten that man could be responsible for Vietnam, for prisoners in cruel cages, for poverty, for the future of the children. So man is not responsible. He is free from caring. And he even may learn to praise that fact. After all, segregation reduces conflict. Wars provide some of the few remaining chances for making heroes. Poverty reveals the sloth of the masses. So praise the darkness. It is a darkness which no light can penetrate. It is a darkness in which our evil works are obscured and therefore is to be praised and loved.

Man's need to praise and affirm is what gets him into trouble. He tends to brew up some kind of religion in the darkest places. And

he knows intuitively that praise demands something that is praiseworthy. Over the long haul, this means that he cannot continue to praise the "cold, the darkness, the corruption."

He lights a light in the darkness which he has made. But he cannot be content only to dispel the darkness. He falls down and worships that light. In silence, in the still smallness that Elijah knew, he feels the need for some kind of sound. So he fashions words in the stillness. The silence is broken by man's song to himself. He listens as if a gospel has been spoken. He has made his own good news.

I am describing a modern condition. It comes from combining a rejection of the claims of any historic religious faith with a high-minded and sensitive concern for humane values. The trouble is that this sensitive concern becomes the object of worship. Concern is confused with gospel. Modern man tends to worship his concern. This is the object of his adoration.

The mistake of the Jew is still with us. He became so enamored with the law which had been given him as to become almost independent of the Lawgiver. He listened for law so intently as to be deaf to Word and Gospel. The law was his fetish.

We contemporaries have done as much with our sensitive concern. We depend so much upon it as to become independent of Word. It is a cheap evasion. We think that by replacing law with "love," we have avoided the mistake of the Jew. We have not pulled that off. Love is not the opposite of law. Each shuts out the sound of true Gospel. "For unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord." It is this which we do not hear. It is this which is unnoticed light. For we have filled the void with our own sounds and our own light. We feel no need of word or light which comes from above.

Such talking to ourselves has burdened us with great fear. You know how you are startled upon hearing unexpected voices. And you may sometimes go through the house looking for their source. Nothing is then more upsetting than the discovery that you were talking to yourself. An unexplained mystery is better than this. It is one thing to talk to oneself for the sake of keeping company. The fear that is now upon us is that we are speaking truth and salvation to ourselves. And there is reason to suspect our sanity when we talk

to ourselves. That is compounded if we are talking truth and salvation to ourselves.

There are a number of things in current fashion constituting a bid for sanity in this kind of setting. We have come to realize that we must quit talking to ourselves. Our individualism is beginning to catch up with us. So we have conditioned ourselves to listen to other voices. We try to muffle our individuality in a new kind of community.

The older form of address and response is no longer welcome. It is now in vogue to have "rap sessions." Everyone is supposed to listen not so much to anyone else in particular but to the group as a whole. In such a way, he deludes himself with the assurance that he is no longer only doing the talking. He is no longer the egotist spouting salvation sounds. Everyone listens to the group and it should be able to come forth with its own salvation talk and make its own salvation history. One wonders if any appreciable change has taken place. True, the individual is no longer talking to himself. Mankind is now talking to itself. The insanity has been universalized and thereby compounded.

This new style has found its way into the churches. Proclamation from or by the pulpit is no longer to be desired. That has been out of style for some time now. Several books have called for an indefinite moratorium on preaching. Address and response are not to be commended as religious style.

The recommendations for filling that void suggest a situation in which everyone listens and the group talks. From the talking group some kind of brilliant truth is supposed to emerge. By some heretofore unimaginable miracle the group will come up with the salvation word.

It would be better that someone other than a preacher give answer to this trend. Having just returned from a religious convention and having heard the preaching there, I am more sympathetic with what you must endure Sunday by Sunday.

In that respect, I must take care lest I seem to be defending my own profession and its characteristic features. Let me say that I am with you very often in wishing for a moratorium on preaching. But until something else comes along, I am bound to make this observation. *There is no such thing as a Gospel by consensus. I have no faith in*

*that Gospel.* No group can talk out its own salvation any more than an individual can. And I know of no situation in history, in which any community suddenly emerged in concert with the gospel. Every group has to be addressed by the word. And that word is proclaimed. For it has come from above. It is not the revelation of flesh and blood. To be sure there is dialogue in a religious setting. But it is dialogue with a Word that has been proclaimed.

This leads us to look at Advent.

The coming of Jesus can so easily escape us, this and every year. It did not claim the notice of the first age to which he came. Despite the scripture's adoring words, and its hallelujahs — that is with its most abundant narrative — it cannot drum up more than a few shepherds, three wise men, and some angels. Christmas is never guaranteed.

There is no room in Advent, for sure, for praising the cold, the darkness, and corruption. There is no room in Advent for praising the poor memory of heaven, where our names and faces are forgotten; for Jesus comes to see his people. That is the reason God sends him.

There is no room in Advent for talking to oneself. And it is too small and private a room for a talking group to occupy.

Perhaps Rilke speaks to our condition and what may be the proper condition for Advent:

Here in life I am alone,  
And apart from me there is only one Other  
And I am afraid, because I am farther  
away from him than he from me.

That may be necessary to seeing Jesus, this recognition that he is always trying to come to us, that he is never as far away from us as we are from him. And if it at all be true, perhaps the best way to find him is while on our knees, silent, with our eyes closed. That may be superior even to climbing the tree in order to see him. For Advent is a season of penitence, and penitence is the time for confession.

I have long since quit being worried about the commercialism of Christmas. I think Jesus may have enjoyed joining with the throngs at Christmas shopping. Advent is not greatly distorted by commercialism, if at all. Advent is mostly distorted by the lack of confession

on the part of all of us. We prepare for the coming of Jesus as if he were an old friend, a first cousin, a wise teacher — almost anything other than a savior.

But this is the only way he comes and confession is the only way to greet him. Let us not mistake confession for some recital of our bad luck or misfortune. His coming does not mean that we are going to get a better break in life. His coming does not assure us that things are going to turn around for us, that our irritations and our troubles will pass away.

A savior is the promise that we shall not be destroyed by the sting of death which is sin. It means that we do not have to carry through the valley of the shadow, which is tough enough as it is, all those impediments which weaken us too much for the journey.

A savior means that the covenants I have cracked, the trusts I have broken, the promises to which I have not been faithful, the hate that I have held for others, the children I have warped, the weak that I have exploited, the unbelief I have practiced, the rebellion I have exercised — that these are forgiven. It means that I have as many chances as I am willing to take to do better than that.

It means that Jesus Christ will do for me what I cannot do for myself. But it means that he does do that — through his divine power — rather than through my psychologizing of myself. You see, I talk too much because there has always been a great deal of anger in me. So I talk it out and few people are ever able to recognize or realize just how much anger may lie beneath the surface. But that talking, as I have suggested from the first, is not salvation talk. That is psychological talk and I am thankful for its escape valve. But that is not salvation. Salvation saves whether one is angry or talks too much.

So unto us is born a savior. Fall on your knees.



# God Bless America — Please

*July 4, 1971*

*Matthew 20:1-16*

I have been pondering the question of patriotism these past few years. There are obvious causes for that pondering. Our country has been embroiled in a war which many of us believe is a uniquely sinister conflict. Our nation inclines toward Israel, in the terrible tempest of the Mideast, although many of us are not without considerable sympathy for the position of the Arab. The economic policy of our highest officials continue to raise serious doubts in the minds of many, who sadly predict a coming depression or a lingering recession for some years to come. The bizarre school system seemingly made necessary for the sake of integration has shocked the South and made it shout for equality with the rest of the nation. All of these create the sense of uneasiness and foster moods of rebellion.

What is a patriot at times like this? What is he to do? By definition a patriot loves his country, jealously protects its best interests, and recognizes its authority. At the present time, the last requirement of the three is the clinker. If one loves his country and seeks its best interests but feels that its government is not serving those ends, he may defy its authority and yet remain a patriot. At least, I consider this kind of person to be a patriot. I do not ponder his role.

Then too, there are some obviously unpatriotic people who are not problematic. The anarchist does not tax our minds as to what we think of him. Nor is the deserter or the one who revokes his citizenship or one who prefers to live in another land. It is not to condemn these people to say that they are not problematical. They did not cause me to ponder the question of patriotism.

The person who boggles my mind and gives me some sleepless nights is one who has replaced the *day of the nation* with the *day of man*. That is to say that he puts the welfare of universal mankind above the well being of any nation and its people.

Here is the person one has to reckon with. In our nation, he puts humanity first and America second. His intentions are pure, his vision universal, and his love inclusive. His motives can hardly be questioned. He weeps over the casualties of war because people are dying on both sides. He is angered by our government because it weeps only for its own and exults in a paradoxical way over the body count of the enemy. He is so concerned for the starving people of the world that he does not believe the economic security of the United States should be its first concern. He would have our national leaders jeopardize the financial security of this land for the sake of the starving peoples of the world. And he would allow the educational system of the land to become a shambles for the sake of man.

This is the unpatriotic but good man, highly idealistic and sensitive to human suffering. He does not sing "God bless America." He sings "God bless man." Although he may not insist that these two invocations are mutually exclusive, he certainly does not believe that they are mutually important. Man before the nation is his theme.

The parable of the vineyard laborers is his parable even if he may misinterpret it. No matter their small input, no matter their small responsibilities, no matter many distinctions let all men be equally served and benefited. Those of early morning sweat should get no more than those who work the twilight cool. Grace unlimited is his motto.

No less a figure than the highly popular and competent Erich Fromm has written in this mood: "Not the national holiday but the 'day of man' [should] become the highest holiday of the year." Thus the Fourth of July would become outmoded. This could happen only, as Fromm suggests, if "all nations concur and are willing to reduce their national sovereignty in favor of the sovereignty of mankind; not only in terms of political but also in terms of emotional realities."

I do believe that a fourth of July is a good time — even the best

time — to consider this proposition. For that reason I choose this above a communion meditation, a symbol in itself.

Now this idealistic and unpatriotic man, as I have described him, is considered to be a good man by most and even a Christian by some. Even if his theories are discounted they are discounted because they are impractical. His ideas will not work. But I am prepared to say that they should not. And I say this because of my conviction that this is not a Christian position although the person indeed may be a Christian.

From the beginning of faith it has been assumed that man could not save himself — the fall which corrupted him and the whole of creation means that he cannot save himself. By the same token, the faith has always assumed that man was the instrument of salvation. That is to say that a particular man, a particular group become instrumental in the mission and the purpose of God.

In the case of the Judeo-Christian faith, this meant the Jews. From Abraham until now, it has been believed that God used a particular people for the redemptive purpose. It is because man is the instrument of God's salvation that we must understand ourselves as particular adjectival beings; as Americans, Frenchmen, blacks, orientals, Christians, atheists, Buddhists.

So far as the Jew was concerned, his nation and his faith were so interchangeable, that there was no conflict between assuming that the Jewish nation was to be an instrument of redemption. Because, as we believe from history, that nation rejected its mission in its rejection of Jesus Christ, another instrument was burdened with the redemptive mission. These are Christians.

In this case, the situation is not as simple as the one of Jewish instrumentality. There is not now and there never has been a Christian nation as there is and has been a Jewish nation. This is quite obvious when we trouble to think of it. The Jew, no matter where he lives, continues to identify with the Jewish nation, now struggling to keep itself together in the Mideast. Christianity is not indigenous to any given nation so that the Christian has also to belong to a kingdom which is not of this world.

But this does mean that the Christian and the church must work with the nations in which they exist in order to be a blessing to mankind.

In our own case this is America. And the patriotism of an American Christian is informed by his hope that his land will be a blessing to all lands. He loves the nation, not as an end in itself to be sure, not beyond the kingdom of God, but he does love it as he would an instrument for the purpose of God. Which means that he wants it to be refined, useful, true, and good.

The writer of I Peter, for example, was speaking to his audience of converts from Judaism rather than to the Jew when he said: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . ." Even here the concept of nationalism could not be avoided.

So we are aware that the American nation is not a Christian nation. It is therefore not the primary instrument for God's redemptive purpose. At the same time to whatever extent the nation and the church, the interim kingdom between resurrection and the last day, are consonant in their purpose, then we may call America the instrument of God for the blessing of all mankind.

In this wise we must love Americans if we are to love other men. This is our point of reference. We love Americans as fellow workers in the mission to the world. America has come on the scene late as did the workers of the twilight cool in the parable. This is not, according to Rudolph Bultmann, a parable on grace as much as one on responsibility. The late workers fulfilled their responsibility. They were obedient to that for which they were called. And they have been blessed abundantly as a result. Indeed some other nations would have as much right to come in as did those arriving earliest in the vineyard.

But let America and all other nations take note. It is not to the nation but to the church that God gives his certain word. The United States can in no way lay claim to a revelation which is not given to other nations. For so far as that revelation is embodied in Jesus Christ, it now rests with his body, which is the church. In the vineyard of the labor of the nations of the world, the late arriving American had better make very sure that it indeed is obedient to the word of the Lord.

It was with considerable gratification that I witnessed the latest decision of the Supreme Court. While it struck down those actions which had the government aiding specific religion in specific

ways, it refused to recognize a wall of separation between church and state.

This is very much to the good. It does not in my view mean that the church may rest comfortably now that the government has not decided to rule out help for it. It means that the government does not care to be so far separated from the church as to get beyond hearing its proclamation.

On the other hand, we may invoke the blessing of God on America with some pleading — with some saying please — because it is the land of our church, it is the instrument for blessing the world as the channel through which the church may make its proclamation. It is for this reason that the Christian is indeed a patriot and he never really transcends the nation in which he lives.



# The Lord's Supper

*October 1, 1972*

*Psalm 23; John 6:25-40*

Along with some of you, at least, I have my pride. That means that the profound confession ingrained in the Lord's Supper is not easy to enjoin. As modern man may see it, if he chooses, the entire Judeo-Christian way poses an insult.

Can you imagine a self-respecting and self-contained person saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?" This upstart awareness, not heretofore considered, caused me to rush to Mr. Webster. There I had my worst fears confirmed and compounded. You see, if the Lord is my shepherd, then I am his sheep. And to be sheepish is to be meek, timid, or stupid. Furthermore, it represents embarrassment when we become conscious of our faults. Thus it may be true that to anticipate still waters and green pastures, to enjoy the nurturing discipline of the shepherd's staff, is to engage in sheepishness.

So it is that not only do I feel silly before this table, I also succumb to considerable envy of those who are not here because they are convinced that our being here is consummate silliness. The most extreme form of envy is probably experienced when an individual wishes he were like the person who never entertains the slightest desire to be like the one doing the wishing. In this wise the poor envy the rich, the ugly the beautiful, and the timid are jealous of the aggressive.

As for me, I envy the kinds of people I almost became. I am referring to fearless, self-contained, self-assured, indefatigable, and venturesome persons, who believe they can turn the world around by dint of their own good work. Think of the chaplain of Yale

University, William Coffin, bringing home three prisoners of war from Hanoi and telling Mr. Dubs, of the State Department, to shut up and listen to him. I think that I would have enjoyed that kind of scene, shocking Washington like that.

I am sure that this approach to life is to be preferred over those of us who are busily getting ourselves saved and withdrawing from the world in the process. And that describes a host of people. Mr. Coffin could not get as many young people to go the Hanoi route as would have been the case a few years back. They are too busy telling one another in sweet little conclaves what Jesus means to them without bothering to think of what their brother also ought to mean to them.

This approach to life is surely to be preferred over those who stick with the status quo and with narrow vision look on the bright side of life. They can see some good in Watergate and the wheat deal. Because the world is not totally evil in every degree, all of us can find the good and only the good if that is all that we look for. This is to say that something good will come out of the Reynolds Hospital mess. It is to say that the county commissioners and city aldermen are thinking only of the people and that their adolescent wrangling with each other is a reflection of that truth. You can go to East Winston and see nothing but the Butterfield estates and wonder why the black complains about his lot in life. And since more people are working than ever before, it is not important that more people are also not working than ever before.

I will always take the Coffin and Dubs scenario in preference to that. I do not envy people who withdraw or the people of the status quo. It is the Coffins I envy. And yet I have more than a sneaking suspicion that Coffin and Dubs are apt names for the Hanoi caper. In other words, Mr. Dubs would like to bury it. And Mr. Coffin wants to prove that Mr. Dubs's crowd has really dubbed this situation, in wake of which he would like to dub it a success for his side.

You see I was going in that direction, the Hanoi route, for some time. If I may borrow a page from Paul, I have always been active in the causes of civic righteousness. As a very green young preacher I bucked a powerful syndicate of graft, liquor, and prostitution in the coal mining area of the southwest of Virginia. In Princeton, West Virginia, I fought for decent recreation for the young against the

city fathers and the rich. I was the first chairman of the first Mayor's Committee on Human Relations south of Louisville. Also when in Durham, North Carolina, I fought for the rights of government workers as chairman of the Merit System Council of North Carolina, parenthetically following Mr. Jasper Memory of this school and congregation in that post. I was removed by a governor because I insisted that the council keep faith with one of its supervisors. I am an honorary member of Alcholics Anonymous because of my work with that great body. Here I have been a member of the Governor's Good Neighbor Council, on a task force with Model Cities, and am now chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Advocacy and Mediation. We score points by writing sharp letters to the hospital authority and the school board.

But you see, along with Paul, I believe that this is all garbage for the sake of knowing Christ. And that is why I am at communion while those people I envy are out there drumming along the Hanoi route. Some of them, to be sure, are taking their communion this morning, but it strikes me as another act of doing good. By taking communion they are possibly doing something for Christ rather than letting Christ do something for them.

We might clarify the whole matter if we see the distinction between sheep and goats. Both of these were used as sacrifices in early times. But the goat was somewhere changed into a scapegoat along that line. He was burdened with the sins of the people and driven over a cliff as a process of eliminating sin from the world. But by the time the sheep symbol had reached the New Testament, the sheep were no longer being sacrificed. The shepherd, Jesus Christ, had laid down his life for the sheep. So I am the sheep of his pasture and that is why I am at this table.

This means that I confess that I am not responsible for my own salvation nor for yours. I have no taste for becoming anybody's scapegoat. I would like at times, I suppose, to be the savior. That is because I have had my bite from Eden's apple with a view to effecting the determination of good and evil. I have argued mightily that if God gave the likes of me dominion over the earth, even the power of naming its animals, why do I not have power over good and evil? I would like to call good "good" and it so become. Or evil "evil" and so it become. But I know that I cannot do that. If I

could it would be the ruin of all of us.

I know quite well that Paul cautioned the Phillipians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. But he was not referring to the absence of God. Rather they were to work out their own salvation while he, the apostle Paul, was absent from them and that work, with fear and trembling. I work, but not with trembling fear that I cannot accomplish my own salvation. I am sure that I cannot do that. I tremble with fear at the prospect that the good news is too good to be true. I tremble that Jesus Christ may not save us because we are sinners. But I know that for the same reasons of our sinfulness we cannot save ourselves.

So I come here for the bread of life. I come here for the reminder that Christ has already accomplished his work of salvation.

Is this a cop-out? Am I simply evading the rigor of doing the work of God in the world? I trust not. The disciples asked Jesus, "What must we do, to be doing the work of God?" And he answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent."

That is what this bread is all about. We are trusting and celebrating the shepherd of us sheep who has laid down his life for us. We will do that other work, that work in the world that should not be blinked away. That is God's work to be sure. But so is this. And if anyone forces us to make comparisons, then that other work is garbage and this is the bread of life.

Of the cup, Jesus said, "Drink from it, all of you. And I will not drink it again until I drink it new with you in the kingdom of God."

*All of you*, drink from it. All of you who do the work of God by believing. After believing, although you may be betrayers, defiers, defectors, sleepers in the garden of agony, drink from it, all of you.

Do we catch Jesus in contradiction? Why this embrace of all of us in this supper? Did he not talk about self-denial, taking one's cross, doing good, caring for one's brother, all as being related to making it to the kingdom? Now he says, all of you, drink of it. What else would you have had him say? To be sure, he wants us to be good and worthy disciples. He sought loyalty, integrity, righteousness in his following. He spent the short span of his life trying to develop that.

But in searching the gospels, I have found no evidence that the first twelve he called were supermen. The gospels say nothing of the personal qualifications of the disciples. Nor is there any indication that Jesus had a check list to which he referred when he called them.

So with us. There is nothing very remarkable about any of us. Yet we are always under command to rise above our potential in the mission of God. But when Jesus took leave of those disciples who had fallen far below the best, he said drink from this cup of covenant, all of you, no matter what. And I am a bit sheepish about drinking it, I know what it says about me, but Christ is our salvation and we accept his invitation.

He will not drink it again until he drinks it new with us in the kingdom. That is his promise that he will pull it off. That is the challenge he makes to the world. The kingdom will come. God is to be vindicated. So as one of the sheep I drink the cup and salute the Second Coming.



# The Good News of Judgment

May 13, 1973

*Matthew 22:15-22; Amos 7:1-9*

Amos said that he saw God standing beside a wall built with a plumb line and that God had a plumb line in his hand. The shape of a person's life is measurably affected by his response to the claim of Amos. Even in a time when such visions are suspect, I take Amos seriously. I do not have to believe in the literality of that plumb line in order to attest to its reality. Even now I can imagine God standing beside the wall of humanity which he had built to be true, and wondering why it got out of line. Because I believe that God is the judge of his creation and that creation must square with his judgment, the plumb line sometimes looks like a hickory stick.

In the days of Amos, Israel was the wall beside which God had taken his place with that plumb line dangling from his hand. What had been built in truth was now a lie, out of line with the will of God.

God warns that he is ready to set that line down in the midst of Israel and never again pass by its deviation and rebellion. God had already threatened a plague of locusts and fire for the people but repented of those ideas when Amos interceded. Amos was silent about the plumb line. God might well repent of natural disasters like the locusts and fire. Israel would have to repent of that.

That plumb line is still in the midst of us. It has not been removed.

Believing that you will make the necessary exceptions for my ignorance of engineering and my notorious mechanical inaptitude, I dare to draw a contrast between a plumb line and a level as to their use in assuring a straight and true wall. Obviously, modern tech-

nology has produced more precise instruments for such purposes. Unfortunately, technological practices are usually so remote from persons, by virtue of their automation, as to discourage their symbolic use. Modern life may blame some of its barrenness upon the fact that technology is almost devoid of symbolism.

In any event, a plumb line establishes verticality. It is dropped from above to the center of gravity. A level establishes a horizontal. Crudely put, plumb lines square with the heavens while levels square with the earth. I doubt that the level had been invented by the time of Amos. Even if it had, Amos could not have imagined God using a level instead of a plumb line. Neither can I.

Plumb lines are not dependent upon the wall in any way for measuring their alignment. They are set, before the wall is even begun. A level is dependent upon the wall that it measures. It cannot work unless it can be placed on whatever portion of the wall has already been laid.

The verticality and independence of the plumb line make for a parable to Christians living in a secular time. Their lives should be shaped more by a plumb line than by a level.

If he lives by what he professes, the secular moralist will work with a level rather than a plumb line. By secular moralist, I mean a good person who wants life to square with what is right. I also am speaking of a good man who does not believe in God or, at least, does not believe that God is needed or has any business in the world of moral humanity.

Such a person usually believes and practices what might be called autonomous ethics or moral autonomy. He assumes that a moral standard is indigenous to history. He looks to the sides of his own life, placing the level horizontally, and adjusting the wall until the bubble is in the middle. He is not concerned with what might be the ethical will of God. At times, he is more adamant about the matter than merely being nonchalant. He sometimes argues that any nonsense about a transcendental ethic opens up a can of worms not even good for fishing.

He will not use the plumb line because its independence and verticality suggest that the criterion and measurement for what is good and true is dropped from the heavens. Belonging as I do to the plumb liner's guild rather than the levelers, I confess to being

envious of the other side. My plumb lining techniques raise a question to which I can find no answer. The question is: "Is good good because God wills it or does God will what is good when and because he sees that it is good?"

If I contend that good is good because God wills it, I am immediately confronted with the problem of evil and the problem of God. If good is depending upon God's willing it, how do we explain evil? Are we going to suggest that even what we know to be evil is good because God has made it? That would be to corrupt God. Or must we confess that God is simply too weak to do anything about evil?

If I decide that God wills what is good only after he has discovered it to be so, I take the plumb line out of his hand and replace it with the level. I make him subordinate to the moral autonomy which is already extant in history. I make him dependent upon what already has been built because he must decide on the basis of that what is good and what is evil.

My secular friends have no such problem. Good and evil are synonyms for the greatness and the weakness of humankind. It is as simple as that.

However great the temptations for some other style, the Christian, if he lives by what he professes, is shaped by the transcendent ethics symbolized by the plumb line. He is inevitably mindful of the fact that "God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good." That is to say that God arbitrarily saw goodness in what he had made. Nor can the Christian forget that perhaps the first attempt at autonomous ethics occurred in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation to compete with God as to who would determine what was good and what was evil.

The Christian is stuck with the problem of evil so long as he stands juxtaposed with the plumb line. The moment he rids himself of the problem of evil, out goes the plumb line and in comes the level. The shape of a Christian's life will always contain the contours of that question mark reaching from Jeremiah's early "why" of Jesus on the cross of his own "why" in the tragic present. When he prays, "Thy (transcendent) will be done," the Christian takes up his question mark and follows Jesus.

Living by the transcendent and independent will of God places the Christian in double jeopardy. He is often tried twice for the

same crime or sin. Any offense committed against his own kind is also an offense against God. He must therefore level with his fellowmen, making amends and repairing what he has done to them. He must also work through his relationship with God.

So vulnerable is he to this double jeopardy that his gifts to God must lie inactive and ineffectual on the altar, until he searches out the brother that has something against him. When he reconciles with his brother, then he is to return and offer his gift. He cannot get right with God if he is wrong with his brother. But he cannot simply by getting right with his brother also get right with God. He must return to the altar and offer himself to God.

This is the reason why the Christian, after having made right relationships with his brother, is not finished as is the secular moralist. He still comes to worship and to the altar confessing his sin and seeking the merciful redemption of God. Even when the Christian seems to be level and even with the world, when he has done with other persons what he should do, nevertheless he must still acknowledge the plumb line and measure himself accordingly.

This principle of double jeopardy may not be as old as Methuselah but it is as old as Moses for sure. It is clearly written into the law of Moses. The first four commandments attest to jeopardy before God: no other gods, no graven images, no profanation of the holy name, no violation of the sacred day of worship.

The last six commandments may be said to constitute jeopardy before one's fellowmen. Certainly in modern times, autonomous ethics — the morality of the level — has incorporated all but one of them into civil law. Envy is not against the law. But the dishonoring of parents, killing, adultery, stealing, and libel are legally taboo in one way or another. By its very nature, moral autonomy is not concerned with the first four commandments and thus has not worked them into the law.

The moral secularist presumes that basic morality, particularly as it may be legally enacted, is sufficient. The Christian does not live like this. Perhaps he remembers or intuits the uncommon practice of the prophets in this regard. We may presume that the Jews broke the laws against stealing, adultery, killing, false witness or libel on a par with average human beings. Yet the prophets were much more concerned with foreign treaties which suggested trafficking with

other gods, with idolatry, and to a lesser degree with profanation and the dignity of the Sabbath.

As to the horizontal morality of the people, they spoke very little about killing, adultery, stealing and the like. They raised their voices against the exploitation of the poor. They condemned sacrifices to God which were offered as a bribe for the sake of their immorality. Neither of these is mentioned in the commandments.

By virtue of their emphasis upon the first four laws of the decalogue and their introduction of new concerns into the latter category of the law, the prophets clearly indicated that God does not give only those laws that may be easily converted into an autonomous ethic and that he does not yield to bribes that would cause him to get out of the morality business.

To live in the world as if he were not subject to double jeopardy causes the Christian to lose or forfeit a distinctive life style. He becomes like one of our friends who lamented: "I think like a Christian and live like a humanist." This has happened to most of us, who worship and say our prayers and support the church with some of our time, talent, and money. That is an indication of the way we think but we live in the world like any other good man. Furthermore, we see no reason for doing otherwise. But we see no reason for doing otherwise because we have ceased to live under double jeopardy and have quit living in the two worlds of moral and ethical judgment. We use the level as frequently and conscientiously as do all good people, but we no longer pay attention to the plumb line.

This would be of small matter if the only question had to do with our own personal loss of one characteristic of a Christian life style. There is more at stake than this. The loss of that characteristic is bad news for the world, secular as well as sacred.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Indeed that is the crux of the matter. There was no way to use a level in the conflict between Rome and the Jews. The leaders of the latter were talking of division and imbalance between Rome and Jerusalem. It was a debate which could not be settled by an autonomous ethic. In their question to Jesus, the questioners were prepared to label him as a traitor to the faith should he say that the taxes must be paid. If he said otherwise, they assumed that Rome would take care of this troublemaker.

Jesus appealed to the transcendent law. It was right and proper that people should pay taxes to a government which assumed its responsibility for them. But that was only right and proper in light of God's will that it should be so. And when he said that they should give to God what was God's, the final and irrevocable judgment of God was certainly central to his statement.

Moral autonomy is the milieu in which good men, in the doing of what is right as they see it, are inevitably dividing themselves into opposite camps, thus going to war against each other.

We can see why Jesus told his disciples, "Judge not that you be not judged." This is not an injunction against the judgment of the plumb line but of the level. As he said, judging in terms of an autonomous ethic means that one must be judged only on the basis of what the other person thinks is right or believes to be some absolute which he has never quite been able to find. Jesus was not so much inveighing even against censorious judgment as against judgment that was empty and non-redemptive. The world is what it is now because so many of us are judged by the same measure that we have used in our judging. And the level of moral autonomy simply cannot bring the world to balance.

When a person tells me that he is going to level with me, I ought to be careful. So should he if I should say the same to him. He means that he is going to get on eye level with me, being honest and unequivocal, telling it like it is. And possibly telling me the truth about myself. But when he levels, he most certainly is thinking of descending to my level — perhaps condescending to my level. There is no judgment here. This is mere rapping about ethics and morality. I would prefer to be judged by one who is higher than I, who looks down on me and deserves to look down on me.

Otherwise, holy judgment has been thrown to the dogs. Otherwise the plumb line is being trampled in the mire of the pig pen.

# Join the Church

*October 18, 1970*

*Genesis 28:10-22*

This the man who had the dream about the ladder. We sing about it sometimes and call it Jacob's ladder. Jacob was on his way from Beersheba to Haran to pick out a wife. His parents did not approve of any of the local girls. Their other son Esau had given them sufficient cause, it would seem, for their attitude in this respect.

Since it was a long trip, Jacob spent at least one night on the road. It was at this time that he had a dream of the ladder, set up on earth and reaching all the way to heaven. Angels were climbing up and down the rungs.

Jacob's vision included a blessing from God and a reminder of the covenant between them. In response, Jacob made a vow when he had awakened from his sleep that he would keep covenant with God and, according to God's blessing, would be a good steward of all he might possess.

But this was not enough for Jacob, There had to be something more than visions and vows. Jacob felt the need to give permanence to his encounter with the Lord. Therefore, he took the stone which he had used for a pillow, stood it on end and made a monument out of it. As a final act, he anointed it with oil. Then he decided that the place should be known as the house of the Lord — or Bethel.

So it was that an ancient sojourner, primitive by our modern standards, nevertheless introduced us to a religious problem in that event, which we have not resolved up unto this day.

The problem has to do with Jacob's action in consecrating the commonplace, setting up a holy place as a memorial to his encoun-

ter with God. Had he been content to have his vision and make his vow, we would have no difficulty. But in all probability neither would we know of this event in his life. When he built a monument to his encounter with God, he laid himself on the line.

He embraced the incontrovertible principle that commitment to an invisible God must of itself be visible, if it is to have meaning and punch. To put it another way, dedication to the Creator, who cannot be seen, must use the stuff of his creation, which can be seen.

But at the same time, this consecration of what is commonplace — like anointing a rock with oil — oozes with the odorous stench of idolatry. We may safely assume that numbers of people who came to Bethel after Jacob's event saw little more than the anointed stone, forgetting the reason of its presence there and the cause for which it had been erected.

This is the risk that any great religion must always take. For any great religion demands commitment and the demand for commitment never escapes the component threat of idolatry. Commitment is a very public and a very tangible thing. Hear Paul's word to the Romans: "... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved." Paul was making no significant distinction between justification and salvation or between believing heart-wise and confessing lip-wise. They were inseparable in his view. One who believes confesses. One who confesses, confesses belief.

Jacob called his place the House of God, thereby involving the church in this quandary by name as well as by actuality. The quandary may be simply expressed. Is the act of commitment so indispensable as to justify the risk of idolatry, or is idolatry so destructive that it should never be risked and therefore the act of commitment is virtually abolished?

Those of us who are churchmen know better than "church despisers" that "church" often does more to hide God than reveal him, tends more to replace Christ than represent him, struggles more to become the ultimate reality than to symbolize that reality.

Because of this realization, it appears that we are forsaking the concept of visible faith because we can no longer afford the conse-

quences of idolatry. As a result religious idolatry is on the wane. Notice — religious idolatry is on the wane. Idolatry in other categories is flourishing as never before: all the way from Joe Willie Namath to Angela Davis. But we have crumbled under the fists that pound away at religious and churchly idolatry. And we have decided that the risk and the pummeling are too great a cost.

It is inevitable that this caution against idolatry should take its toll in terms of commitment. For if commitment is not public, that is, if it does not skirt the edge of idolatry, and carry on its flirtation with idols, it is not authentic commitment.

The trend away from possible idolatry, and thus away from public commitment, is evident in the growing reluctance of people to join the church. By their own self-estimate, they are not less religious than before. They continue to dabble in the dimensions of the spirit and embrace Tillich's sense of ultimate concern. Nevertheless, they are wary of joining the church. Prevailing against the idolatrous tide, they have lost sight of the necessity for commitment that is tacked on the public bulletin board.

My personal response to this poised dilemma should be evident in the sermon title: "Join the Church." I am therefore prepared to argue that public commitment is so essential to the Christian life — indeed to most any kind of religious life — as to justify the inevitable risk of idolatry that accompanies it.

Let me begin by contending with those of us who are members of this church. I begin here because you and I are the chief reasons whether or not people join this church. There are reasons why people are not joining the church today. Churches everywhere are in disrepute. Faith in the transcendent and supernatural is not as easy as it used to be. Technology seems to make the care and gifts of a shepherd-Lord somewhat superfluous and possibly second rate. But these are secondary reasons.

Throughout their history, churches have not been embraced by people because of the preacher's excellence or because of doctrinal certainty. They join the people who belong already to a given church. Admittedly, they may sometimes join them with reference to class status. And newcomers are alternately attracted or repelled by the friendliness level in a given congregation. There is a deeper and more genuine reason.

Let me give a "for example." If I were looking for a church to join,

I would not give major consideration to the preacher — his gifts or theological position. Nor would I concern myself with how many or few people shook my hands or greeted me as a visitor to the service. I would try to determine the visibility of the congregation. By this I mean I would look for the visibility of its commitment. I would want to know its common cause. And if that cause were obscure, diffused and diffident, poorly expressed or not at all, I would be hesitant to join with that church. On the other hand, I could be sure that common cause would mean community and fellowship, and that in any community accepting one another I would also be accepted.

May I, in this vein, suggest to you what I see to be our commitment as a church in this place? We may verbalize by saying that we are committed to the God of Jesus Christ. But in terms of visible commitment we need to say more about our life style as a church in this place. Therefore:

We are a body of faith which proclaims given truth, i.e. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," in an environment which pursues truth but never manages to domesticate it. We have been given enough truth for life but believe that life is enhanced by the never ending quest for more truth and its confirmation.

We are a body of faith which eagerly submits our proclamation to the disciplines of inquiry and communication. We are not afraid that intellectual acids, contrary opinions, or empiricism will alienate us from a transcendent God.

We are a body of faith which believes in the church and we are not afraid to affirm it, even to love it, all the while being cognizant that it is a human institution, which in no way supplants the God of Jesus Christ.

We are a body of faith which seeks to be sensitive to the needs of all men as we depend on the Spirit of Christ to sharpen and sustain our sensitivity.

We are a body of faith that is dedicated to social justice, which seeks to topple the powers of injustice, including those ecclesiastical powers of injustice, but we seek to act in reconciliation thus loving both the just and the unjust.

We are a body of faith which finds challenge and excitement in our diversity: town/gown, young/adult, business/professional/intellectual, liberal/conservative, and we are exhilarated in the chal-

lenge of making a community which embraces such diversity.

We are a body of faith which is open to all who desire by their own personal decision to belong to a community that proclaims Jesus is the Christ and Christ is Lord.

Now let me conclude by addressing those of you who are members of churches in other places but not where you now live and those who make no public profession at all. To the first group, your commitment somewhere else, in the church back home, or in the city from which you have moved, cannot be telecast to this community. Your commitment is not visible unless you make it visible here. The shape of the student body will be determined by how public is the Christian commitment of some of you students. After all, with no disparagement of some of your worthwhile ministries in the ghetto, some of your idealisms about helping the poor can be a means of evading the very painful necessities of confronting your peers. No matter how old fashioned, how hopelessly out of style it may sound, the fact still remains that the lost, uncommitted, rudderless and confused friend in your dormitory needs a certain kind of witness from you just as much as does the victim of blight and oppression.

To faculty and administration I would say, that the public nature of your commitment to the God of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the shape that this university will take in the days to come. You should join the church.

To those who have made no public commitment in any place, who out of doubt and timidity, who out of extreme modesty, are not professing people, to you I would say, the church is a redemptive place. Liturgy is important. Theological and philosophical beliefs are important. A man should not profess to be what he is not unless he intends to become what he professes. But if the church is a redemptive place, then part of that redemption should occur after one has become a member of the church. So you should join the church. And if there is one or more there, by chance, who belongs to none of these categories — who is the enemy of God, who hates the faith and its church — if by chance you are here to hear these words by other means — to you, we proclaim: Our Christ died for you, whether you asked him to or even wanted him to do so, he did. And we shall pray for you.



# Things I Can't Preach and You Can't Hear

November 2, 1980

*I Samuel 8:10-18; Romans 8:18-28*

I cannot preach that tithing is an appropriate and necessary aspect in the Christian way of life; if I could and did, you could not and would not hear it. I cannot preach as if I have access to inerrant authority; if I could and did, you could not and would not hear it. I cannot preach hell fire and brimstone raining a deadly torrent on sinners far and near; if I could and did, you could not and would not hear it. I cannot preach joy without insisting upon taking notice of a suffering world; if I could and did, you could not and would not hear it.

I cannot preach tithing and my incapacity is not due only to the fact that it was a legalistic practice given scant attention in the scriptures of the New Testament. I am also restrained because tithing was practiced in endless confusion from the beginning. As of the present, there are debates about whether a tithe is to be taken from gross or net income; in those days there were differences about a tithe of crops or cattle, whether it should be given to kings for support of sanctuaries or directly to sanctuary officials, whether tithe and first fruits were the same thing or separate, whether the tithe should benefit only the priests or also be given to the poor and in some instances even to the household of the farmer making the offering. First Samuel warns that, if Israel insists upon having a king, the king will take a tenth and give it to his officers and servants and take the tenth while enslaving those who make the offering.

Subject as it was, and still is, to endless legalistic wranglings, to corruption, to temptations of self-righteousness, and to straitjacketed faith, the tithe is hardly a fit subject for homiletics. It is not an appropriate or necessary aspect of Christian practice. As a general rule your patterns of stewardship indicate nothing to the contrary.

I cannot preach as if I have access to a source of inerrant authority. I am but a preacher-person, under constraint to proclaim the Word, but with the conviction that God determines according to his own will at what time the words I offer become his word. I am mindful of scriptural discrepancies, of the ambiguities of theological abstractions, of my personal sin as an ever present deterrent to pure religious experience. Given the limitation of my mind and my spirit, I am not able to recognize, understand, or declare religious absolutes. As to a text, undergirding my authority to preach, I turn consistently to a passage from I Timothy: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

So it is that the only perfection, to which I may refer in my proclamation, is the perfect patience of Jesus Christ as he allows me to preach despite the lack of complete assurance in that preaching. And I am convinced beyond any doubt that if I stood in this place, acting as an absolute authority, you would simply ignore me, your kindness preventing you from taking more drastic action.

I cannot emulate Jonathan Edwards, causing you or others to faint from fear as I deliver the chilling news of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." When I am asked if I believe in hell, I answer "no" because I believe in Jesus Christ. By the same token, I do not believe in the devil which would make me a "devilian" rather than a Christian. It is not for me to say whether or not there is a hell, whether or not there is a devil, I can only say that these are themes which I cannot incorporate in my preaching. Were it not for the parable of the wedding garment, where one who has been compelled to come to the wedding feast is cast nevertheless into the outer darkness, I would probably be a universalist in my theology of salvation.

In any event, I am more at home, theologically, experientially, and emotionally when preaching of God's grace in Christ than preaching the vengeance of God. And I am more than reasonably sure that were I to lace my sermons with hell fire and brimstone, you would personally transport yourself to a level above the fray, cooling the environment with your detachment while icily assessing my mental state and wondering inwardly, What is wrong with our preacher? This is so unlike him.

And I cannot preach joy, if that means that we refuse to live in the pit with those who suffer and blind our eyes and shut our ears to the fact of their distress. In other words I cannot preach joy in a cosmic context of joy. The world is neither a good or pleasant place. One who refuses to see that reality in order to experience personal joy will find little support in the preaching I do. I can preach joy if allowed to say that the sufferings of this present time must be understood in the light of the glory which awaits us. I can preach of joy, of caring and living for others. I can preach the joy of enduring through the pains of life while remaining faithful. But these are not pains which are put to sleep by a dose of theological aspirin. And I cannot preach joy apart from the struggle to free the captives, open the eyes of the blind, remove the yokes of the oppressed, and give sympathy to those who suffer.

And if I did and could, I would discover that you do not come to this place looking at life and the world through rose colored glasses. I am forever impressed with the fact that you ask no cheap joy from this pulpit. God's grace has made you sensitive enough to know that a society which has no place for color, no room for minority, no charity for the poor is not a society in which to rejoice.

I cannot preach these themes, but in the light of my admitted imperfections it should not surprise you that there are times when I wish that I could and there are times when I am strongly tempted to do so. In making that confession, I am making another which needs to be explained. My wish and temptation to preach such sermons must surely come from my awareness that such sermons are being preached in the "super churches" of this present age. And there are those times when I would like very much to be the pastor of a "super church."

For example, I am relatively sure that churches in which tithing

is preached as an undeviating command from the Lord are the same churches which are riding out the storm of inflation, which threatens to capsize the rest of the congregations. As I sift through the church newsletters which come to my desk, those reporting themselves in considerable arrears with respect to their annual budgets are not manned by preachers who emphasize tithing as a practice in obedience to God's unmistakeable command. On the other hand, I have the distinct impression that the money is forthcoming when and where tithing is preached in such a way as to create both guilt and fear on the part of those who do not tithe.

There is also an unmistakeable corollary between a successful church and a preacher who claims to be delivering inerrant and absolute truth. You may bring every weapon you have in your arsenal to shoot down the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, but those who preach that doctrine are the ones being heard in this present time. Even if such authority is more akin to that of the Pharisees and scribes, legalists and copyists, it seems not to matter; such authority is preferred to that of Jesus, whose authority was not of that ilk. Absolutism and success are cousin close in successful churches.

And I would remind you that the preacher who said, "Almighty God does not hear the prayer of a Jew," baptized over two thousand converts into his church in the year just past. His is an evangelism of hell fire and brimstone. One is either saved or not saved; there is no ambiguity. Any one who does not believe in Christ as Savior, who does not confess his sins and repent, who does not walk the aisle in a public profession to such ends is deemed simply as a candidate for hell.

Moreover, I would remind you that the super churches are homogeneous and preach the virtue of their homogeneity. They are class churches, made up of people of common interests, race, and group, who have fellowship with one another in the joy of being alike. Such churches do not agonize over discrimination, or poverty, or war, or ecological misbehavior. They have shut themselves away from the misery of the milling crowd and live unto themselves counting dollars and noses with undisguised joy. And because they have already made it all the way to the promised land, they want to hear how good it is for them to be there and they do not want to

hear about the troubles of those who have not made it socially, financially, or religiously speaking.

I must be fair with you. I cannot blame you for not being the kind of people who make up a super church. I am glad that you are not. Even if you were and encouraged the kind of preaching which I have described, I would still be unable to preach in these themes. So, if we are agreed that we will not and cannot, either or both, engage in the kinds of religious exchanges and practices which seem to evolve into super churches, what kind of church should we be and what are we willing to do to become what we should?

Will we and can we be a church which, rather than meeting its levy or paying its bills, will undergird and support its commitments? If I read you correctly, you wish to be a church which takes worship seriously, which wishes to be theologically and aesthetically faithful in the conduct of worship, which wants to hear the Word proclaimed on the basis of revelation but under the scrutiny of reason, which wants fellowship both charitable and caring, which wishes to do evangelism in the name of Christ, which seeks to engage in mission to the total needs of the person supplying bread as well as the bread of life, which wants to do missions for the sake of the kingdom of God but also for the sake of this present world. So it is that we want a good church, at the local level, want to support the missions undertaken by those conventions with which we affiliate, want to preach salvation and engage in education, care, and healing. So we work with such things as Crisis Control, Contact, Hospice, and Prison Ministries. And we want to support universities, hospitals, children's homes, and homes for the aging. We seek to alleviate world hunger and work in innovative ministries to our neighbors around the corner or down on skid row. And all the while we want preaching, music, religious education, fellowship, ministry to families and to the young. We want counseling and ministry of sympathetic compassion. What else? Surely, I have left out any number of things. If this then is the shape and nature of our commitment, let us remember that we must pay for it. And we need to remember that because our interests are varied — into so many things — that we are never sure that the church can do a better job than some other institution, so why not give to the latter? I will not argue the matter, I will only say that we are always in

danger of expecting the church to do more for others and ourselves than is often reflected in our gifts.

In the second place, if we cannot accept any source, touched by human minds and hands, as one inerrant and absolute in this authority, what source of authority will we mine? Are we going to make the mistake of depending entirely upon naturalism or rationalism? Are we to suppose that since God's revelation must make its way through the sinful litter of ourselves or of others that there is no revelation in which to believe, which to recognize as authoritative? Because we do not have an inerrant scripture, are we to toss the Bible aside as one book among others, despising its uniqueness as we measure it against contrary opinions and our own subjective preferences? Because the preacher is also human, does this mean that the pulpit has no special significance but is a podium from which a person presents his own opinion which is to be judged in the context of every other idea under the sun? Or are we willing to grant that God has indeed made of us special people, and the church a special instrument, for knowing him in Jesus Christ and for sharing our faith in proclamation or mission? In other words, will you believe that because you are a Christian, you have a role to fulfill in this world and age that only a Christian can fulfill, which is to say that what you have to do for and speak to the world is unique and indispensable?

And if you draw back from the use of a "hell fire and brimstone gospel," what is the nature of your concern for the lost and the unchurched? Is the matter of being church of such little concern to you, means so little to you, shapes your life so inconsequentially, that you cannot find the time nor give the bother of making a witness to another? Are we to suppose that, without definite lines between heaven and hell, there is no one out there who would prefer heaven to a state of ambiguity? Are we to suppose that, because there is no assurance of hell's lake of fire, there is no reason to declare to others the gospel of salvation? My friends in Christ, are we so embarrassed and so tentative about who and what we are that we hesitate to invite others to become a part of this community of faith, this church which God has put together in this place with his blessing? Have we no gospel with which to evangelize, no fold to which to bring the sheep straying ever farther away in the darkening hills?

And finally, if we cannot embrace joy because joy is not everywhere about us, does this mean that we cannot have joy at all? Let me, I beg your permission, let me be an honest preacher instead of a dishonest optimist. Let me tell you of the black still suspect because he is black, of the poor, of the broken and broke, of the imprisoned, of the oppressed. Let me tell you of sin in places high and low, in our hearts and in the hearts of the people. Let me for God's sake tell you the truth of the human condition. Let me open your eyes and ears to that, so that you can never taste your joy at a banquet shut away from the reality of the street outside. And if you will let me do so, I will speak to you of joy. Joy over finding hidden treasure, joy over finding the pearl of great price, joy over the lost sheep, the prodigal come home, and joy, yes joy at seeing Christ there with hands outstretched quite visible despite the gloom.



# The Community of the Cross

March 20, 1977

*John 12:27-36; Psalm 100*

Recent novels by Updike, Percy, and Cheever have this in common. In each story, the main character finds some measure of hope for life while a resident of an institution. Updike and Percy set the scene in mental hospitals while Cheever uses a prison setting.

No one can say for sure what lies behind this somewhat sudden trend of using institutions as the setting for a story. However, it is not too much to conjecture that it may reflect the impassioned longing that we moderns have for community. Mental hospitals and prisons are not the kind of communities one would usually yearn for, but they are communities in the sense of being set apart from the masses of society and also by virtue of their being well delineated. As a matter of fact, however distressing the thought, they are some of the only communities that are left in this land of ours.

The modern family, in which every member is primarily bent upon expressing one's individuality, no longer qualifies as a community. We used to speak of neighborhood communities. There are no longer communities of this kind with the exception of the ghetto which is brought to bear by legal, social, and economic factors. We also used to go to neighborhood schools, which gave our children a sense of community. This is no longer the case. In this reference, I am beginning to think that blaming violence on TV for the violent character and action of America's young people is a cop-out. Without the family and the school, our children grow up without community to any real degree. The schools are busy at creating an egalitarian society in which excellence is discouraged

and leadership is frowned upon. It may well be that the schoolroom is now capable of breeding more violence than could ever be accomplished by movies and television. I am not prepared to wager that this is the case, but it is worthy of thought. Mobile, rootless, restless, mass produced adolescence, void of community, may be the ground of violence.

Parker Palmer, dean of studies in a Quaker living-learning community near Philadelphia, believes that the individual needs community more than ever before. Mass society, in which individuals are now forced to live, is characterized by the fact that isolated persons are unable to relate to one another in ways that are free from the principalities and powers of the combination of business-labor and those of the state. Only by communities can an individual find a mediator between himself and the principalities and the powers. Communities provide the lone person with some buffer zone so that he does not have to stand alone against the power of business, labor, and government. Communities amplify the "individual's small voice" so that those forces which oppress him cannot turn deaf when they do not wish to listen.

Our search for communities is a practice marked by poignant reality and a saving wisdom. If we are not able to reestablish both the sense and reality of community within the masses of culture, we are indeed confronted with a bleak and foreboding future.

Unfortunately, our passionate longing for community causes us to assume that any old community will do. It blinds us to the probability that a false community is no better, and perhaps worse, than no community at all. It can hardly be gainsaid that the most of what we are now deeming to be our communities are more false than they are real.

Some years back, I heard this report of a conversation between two of our members. The first said to the other that some people in our church were besieging the diaconate with requests that it give its attention to creating more community among the membership. Then replied the second person to the one who had brought the report, "I know too many people already."

When I first heard this, I quite naturally assumed that anyone who would retort in this way was not interested in community. That is not necessarily so. He may have been saying that he was not

interested in false community. He may have intuited that community is more than people simply being together. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed: "Nothing is easier than to stimulate [simulate?] the glow of fellowship in a few days of life together, but nothing is more fatal to the sound sober . . . fellowship of everyday life."

Our longing for community may be so desperate as to beguile us into developing and searching for false communities; by buying community in weekend chunks at human potential centers, by creating false utopias in the practice of sharing personal relationships, and by finding a place and people where we can fulfill ourselves, thus expanding and extending our own egos under the guise of fellowship.

If we are earnest and truthful in our search for genuine community, then we will not draw back from its authenticity when we are confronted by it.

Community is not a word of the scriptures. Israel, that chosen community of God, spoke of itself as a people rather than a community. The difference in the words is not of immense significance. But we can understand why Israel should think of itself as the people of God because of the covenant between God and the Jews. They were Israel because God had made them so. These ancient people did not directly try to be a community. The effort usually falls of its own weight. They were, said the psalmist, committed to the truth "It is he that made us, and we are his." Genuine community is always called into being for some other reason than simply being community.

Thus Israel said of itself, "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." Because community is called into being in this manner rather than coming to pass simply because people want to know one another and share with one another, then community cannot be a matter of direct fellowship between persons. Wrote Bonhoeffer, "Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them." This has to mean that the community cannot be dissolved, if it is genuine, simply because the people no longer want to be together. It was not made in this way. It cannot be unmade in this way. One does not walk away from real community in a huff or by a whim.

Genuine community is based on interaction on behalf of others.

It is not merely a place where we're cured of our loneliness, accepted without question or judgment, and helped through our troubles. Genuine community affirms the person as well, by suggesting that even the least of us have something to give to others. Thus every authentic community demands economic, social, and political considerations on the part of its members. It is often characterized by a give and take because of ideological disagreement. It is a place of advocacy. And the main way one can be sure that he really wants genuine community is when he engages in it although the person or persons he would never choose to live with, by one's own standards, are inevitably there. For example, Christians are not to be measured by how much they like one another but by how much they love one another.

Most of all community is gathered around a cause. It is there to act authentically for justice, love, and common decency. It is there to build families, to feed the poor, to advocate in behalf of the weak, to preserve nature, to study and to learn, and to stand against the exploitation by the principalities and the powers.

Having made these distinctions between false and genuine communities, let me say that the church is the most promising community which remains alive in our present condition. I am free to say this because the church is surely built around a cause. There are few, if any, congregations in which general consensus and a human affinity for one another would exist materially enough for the body to stay together. Indeed when a church is nothing more than a mutual admiration society, it will not risk breaking up the fellowship by tackling the tough issues of the time. The church is the only body I know which is still willing to risk being community in that place between the realistic distress of our time and that of a joyful hope.

Of course, its cause is the cause of Christ; that is to proclaim the gospel and to participate in the coming of the kingdom of God. This is what gathers us into community and it is a community which makes upon us a covenant claim, into which we are baptized as new persons, and from which we cannot simply walk away as if it makes no difference since we no longer want to have fellowship.

Christ stands between us so that we cannot relate to one another except in him. That is the reason that sometimes it is best of us to

pray for one another than try to iron out our differences in endless talk. That is the reason that it is usually more fruitful to talk to Christ about our brother than to talk to our brother about Christ.

Thank God that while the world snorts its derision at tradition, the church is still in its tradition. The family, the neighborhood, and the school — the university — all have managed somehow, many times through no fault of their own, to lose their traditions. The church has not.

It has not because it has clung to its central symbol that is the symbol of the cross. With gracious wisdom, God has made clear to us this central truth. We would not be community — people of God, household of faith, body of Christ — if the resurrection had been only the triumph over death by a Jew named Jesus without any reference to the kind of death he died. It was a death that, when being lifted up from earth on the cross, drew all people unto himself. It is this which makes the difference, almost an inexpressible difference.

It is then this symbol which is at the top of the steeple, on altars and tables in the sanctuary, and is carried in religious processions. It does have the drawing power which Christ alluded to in John's gospel, however incredible it may seem that the symbol of our faith which has the strongest pull upon the faithful is the symbol of the cross.

No other symbol of faith has persisted as has this one through the years. No other symbol has been so imperishable as it has existed through the years and survived as a tradition. Strange as this may be, it is understandable because if a person lives by the cross, that person is sure to be an integral part of community, a community gathered around the dying and living Christ, a community acting in behalf of others and interacting thusly, and a community with a cause.

I was not surprised that you made no requests for last Sunday's sermon. Then I spoke of my grieving because a broken and sinful world still refused to hear and heed the gospel. And of my grief because I had failed to proclaim it in power so that it would be heard. And of your inability to console me because of your own failure at proclamation.

Some of you worried about the state of my physical and emotion-

al health as a result of the sermon. Some of you felt that I had forgotten my script and left the sermon unfinished. Some wondered at the absence of some shout of joy. And some were glad to get out into the sunshine and away from the gloom.

There have been some efforts to make me happy since last Sunday. But I refuse to be happy over the cross and over the state of this world. I shall continue to grieve until the world hears the word of the gospel, that Christ has died for our sins. But grief is not the same thing as despair. Grief is a sign of caring and despair is a sign of giving up, even giving up caring. I am not filled with despair. Despite grief, I rejoice in the community of the cross. Even if I do not smile all the time, I am glad to be with as many of you who want to live in that community. It is the only one there is.

# On Doing the Morally Possible

June 3, 1973

*Romans 13:1-10; Job 1:6-12*

As I draw near to the end of nine years in this pulpit, I am sure that I have asked this church to be what it could hardly be and to do what it could hardly do, and have done so more than once or twice. Some of these suggested ventures are no longer within immediate recall. At least two of them are more easily remembered because the congregation responded in unusually affirmative ways.

The first suggestion had to do with the prophetic use of money. We looked at our stewardship and discovered that we were almost exclusively engaged in the priestly use of money. We used it to provide therapy rather than prevention. We provided more cures than prophetic confrontation of the causes which made the cures necessary.

The suggestion was studied with some thoroughness. As a result, it seemed quite evident that there was really little that could be done to change or modify our practice.

Another suggestion raised the question of whether or not this congregation could play the role of advocate. Could it speak and act in behalf of others, who, for whatever reasons, could not speak or act in their own behalf?

A good number of our members responded with enthusiasm. We now have a committee on advocacy as one of the standing committees in the church. This committee is at work endeavoring to discover possible opportunities for the church to serve as an advocate. It is too early to tell what fruits may be born from this planting. There is enough evidence already in, however, to suggest that the harvest may be slow and reluctant.

We should not be surprised or disheartened by these discoveries. The shape of our tradition as Judeo-Christians offers a partial explanation. The prophet has always been more individual than communal. Most of the time, his is a lonely and isolated voice. The community of faith has mostly been healing, comforting and redemptive.

Our scriptures were formed after the fact of the fall. Sin and evil were already recognized and operative when they came into being. So our scripture has little to say about planning a perfect society or prophetically preventing whatever might inhibit its realization.

At present, we see little chance for making more prophetic use of money. The question of advocacy is still open ended.

Instead of throwing in the towel in the face of these realities, I wish to suggest a third option. Perhaps the church cannot make prophetic use of money. Perhaps it can but very seldom serve as an advocate. I believe that it can, but that the occasions will be rare and well defined.

But I am sure that the church can be a *community of moral discourse*. I am much indebted to James M. Gustafson, Chicago University's Divinity School professor, for this phrase. I should like to give him due credit for his contribution to my thought in this sermon and desist from numerous and specific quotations.

Such a role does not exhaust the work of the church. But in a time when we have lost sight of ethical considerations, when moral clarity is at a premium, and when sensitive souls are thrashing about in search of the better way, the church must not withdraw from the moral arena.

As a community of moral discourse, the church can find sufficient precedent in its scripture and tradition. Paul's letter to the Romans about one's relationship to government indicates that the church was concerned with its place in the political arena from the beginning. Furthermore, Paul was wrestling with what constituted the proper and morally right position of the Christian to the government.

Let us look at the possibility of the church as a community of moral discourse.

This is not something which the church must become. It is what it already is. The challenge to be such a community is a challenge to

exercise its nature. Because the church is a moral community, there is no moral or ethical question with which it is not concerned. The church may question its overall competence to deal with the weighty issues of society but never because the Word and the gospel are irrelevant to them.

If the church is not competent, it is not because it has failed to achieve expertise in the complex problems of society. It is because it does not know the Word and gospel as it ought to know them. Word and gospel are relevant. Make no mistake about that.

This being the case, it is not necessary for the church to try to be relevant. It already is with respect to moral and ethical issues within society. With this as a reality, every Christian community has a peculiar obligation to itself and to society in general.

This obligation is grounded in the fact that the church alone is a community which gathers naturally for moral discourse. No other group or body constitutes itself for this purpose. Someone may wish to pose the possibility that courts of law are convened to determine what is right and wrong. But they are committed to legal rather than moral decisions. Even if a law is possibly immoral, the court must uphold that law until it is changed.

I am not contending that the church is the only body engaging in moral discourse. I am contending that it is the only body to which such discourse is a natural expression of one of the purposes of its existence. Other groups may, on special occasions, convene for moral discourse. But this is usually contrived around a particular issue. The church, on the other hand, is a regularly constituted body in which moral discourse is one of its expected and regular activities.

Therefore, its own members and society at large may reasonably expect the church to deal with moral issues at all times. In order to meet its responsibility, the Christian community through its pulpit, in Christian education, and in its various study groups should whet its ethical keenness and perception by consistently engaging in moral discourse.

The moral discourse of the church ought to be marked by two or three basic characteristics.

First of all, the fact that it is a moral discourse means that the church so engaged must carefully define its moral posture. There is

no reason for the church to discuss morality from any other point of view. It is useless if it is simply trying to reach some moral consensus from participating members.

When the church is dealing with morality, it must therefore be informed by scripture and by the tradition of its faith. The Bible is not only and exhaustively a document on ethics. But it does tell us of what God has done for man, and what is his will for man and what are his requirements for life.

No matter what may be the specific subject with which it is dealing — politics, family, poverty, war, et al — the church must bring to bear its scripture and its faith upon each and all of them.

Among the many reasons that this is true, is that the average political, economic, or other kind of expert may be speaking from his enlightened self-interest. He is an expert who has reason to be expert in that particular category.

The scriptures of the church have made their decision on this matter. In that delightful myth of Satan's conversation with God, the question of Job's excellent morality was on the agenda. And Satan argued that Job was good because God's blessings on Job had bribed him to be good. God countered with an offer to allow all the blessings to be taken from Job. Only his life was to be spared. His contention was that Job would continue to be a moral man. In the mind of God, morality stemming from self-enlightened interest was not authentic.

Thus the church works at the question of right and wrong not for the self-fulfillment of its members. Not for any feeling that good has been done. Not for what it will mean in good reward for members. But for the sake of establishing what is right and wrong. One of the reasons that the church can establish some central morality is that it postures against doing what is right for the sake of reward. Its belief in grace releases it to pursue the question of morality in terms of the objective will of God.

A second mark of the church's discourse on morality is the attempt to involve all who are concerned. This is the mark of the church's failure as well. For example, as a usual rule, when the church and the economic expert are discussing the question of poverty, neither of the discussants is likely to suffer the pangs of poverty. This gives the kind of objectivity which is needed. But the

poor, who suffer poverty, and the rich, who will possibly have to be soaked and good, if poverty is to be eliminated, will seldom be in the discourse. One of the reasons that the church is not as effective in moral discourse as it could be is that it does not have all the people represented. There is need for rich and poor, intellectuals and common man, young and old, as well as a spectrum of different races and classes when the church is engaged in moral discourse.

Yet another characteristic has to do with language. Whenever the church tries to use language that is not its own language in moral discourse, it goes awry. The church is characterized by moral language as much as by salvation language. It is concerned with right and wrong, good and evil, better and worse, even wise and foolish as much as by redemption, comfort, wholeness, and the like.

When it engages in questions of social morality, it will have to speak in political, economic, sociological, and psychological language, to name a few. But it must realize that this is not its common language. And it must make sure that its own language is not usurped or preempted.

When someone is advised by a secularist, for example, to do what is right for him, the church knows and must aver that this is not a moral statement. Nor must the church allow advice such as do what you are comfortable in doing, do what is pleasant, do what is rewarding to be legitimized as moral advice. As a matter of fact, there is no substitute for the word *sin* no more than there is a substitute for the word *salvation*.

Most sermons I preach are open-ended from beginning to end. I am departing from that style this morning. As we look to the summer ahead where this church, in particular, is more reflective than active, I want us to reflect and act on this challenge.

I hope that some of you will venture to move that we incorporate in the bylaws of this church, that any members singly or together shall have authority to call the church into moral discourse when a particular issue merits that kind of action, from your point of view. In other words, whether it is Watergate or the extension of Silas Creek Parkway, the war or more tennis courts in the city, the enlargement of the coliseum or Ten-and-a-Half Street, a member has the right to ask his Christian brothers to share the faith with him.

Action or resolution may or may not be forthcoming. But the

light of the Christian ethic can and ought to be brought to bear. And the Christian has the right to expect that from his fellowmen of faith.

I could believe that if this were to become our stance and practice, that the community might wish to exercise its right to ask the church to do the same thing.

Let us put this on our agenda and see what we can do with it. Perhaps we cannot be prophetic with our money. It may be that the opportunities for advocacy are rare. But it certainly is possible for us to become a community of moral discourse. It certainly is possible for the church to convene itself when asked to share the truth with a brother inside or outside the church. And I am sure that if we do not ask ourselves, no one on the outside will ever think of it.

# The Symbolic People of God

July 9, 1972

*Genesis 2:15-17, 3:22-24; I Corinthians 12:27-13:13*

In his very fine *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*, Michael Novak avers that "the dominant religious form in nations like the United States appears to be an 'invisible religion' of the private psyche, dependent upon the 'consumer preference' of the private individual." Because of this, "It is very difficult for those who share the stands of today's invisible religion to feel at home in a communal celebration of earth, of memory, of hope, of modest expectation and chastened reconciliation. For the powerful currents of modern religion suggest that man 'masters' the earth, is 'autonomous,' is fulfilled in 'privacy,' and is reconciled to nothing but his own naked will."

Novak goes on to say that "the private psyche carries an unparalleled burden: the task of making sense out of life, all alone." As he sees it, "The mode of invisible religion is solitary pathos."

Very few of us, if any, have been left untouched by the current prevalence of private and often invisible religion. It affects us more than we know even when we are not aware that it has gotten close enough to have influence. So much that is going on under the umbrella of religious renewal has the quality of privacy about it. We are so weary of the invasion of our privacy by every kind of snooping pressure under the sun. It is little wonder that we turn to religion as a means of achieving and maintaining a personal and private dimension of our lives. Perhaps this partially explains the increasing concern we share for the things of the Spirit. Like the wind, it "blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but do not know whence it comes or whither it goes." Our current apathy

toward corporate and organized religion may be because it is visible while the religion of the spirit is conceded to be invisible.

Perhaps the person who contends that his religion is a very personal matter not to be let out for public consumption operates on the same emotional level. When one explains that he has his own religion and is entitled to it just as much as the next man, he may be basing his aversion to religious dialogue on his desire for religious anonymity or invisibility.

In any event, religion has now become a means to privacy. It is jealously guarded by those who have worked their way into this position. As often as not, if one wishes to talk religion with us, he is regarded as an intruder upon our personal and private lives.

Novak has already cautioned us about the dangers of this invisible religion. Individuals under the aegis of this religion are intolerably burdened with the task of making sense out of life all alone. For religion is certainly the juncture at which a person is expected to find the meaning of life. As Peter Berger has previously warned, "Trying to keep up one's own counterdefinitions of the world, all to oneself, is an invitation to meaninglessness." So if one uses religion in this way, he skirts the precipices of "nightmare par excellence." Novak's dreadful observation bears repetition: "The mode of invisible religion is solitary pathos."

Both Novak and Berger inadvertently reveal the pervasiveness of invisible religion even as they warn against it. For their cautions are directed to the private individual. In other words, they speak primarily about what will happen to the individual who has such faith.

Of equal importance is what happens to the community of believers, the religion of the people. For, if and when my brother or sister in Christ is determined to do his own thing in the religious category, he or she has dismissed me from the place where our lives may be most fruitfully joined. A no trespassing sign is hung over the most fertile ground of human interchange and relationships. If I insist that I have my faith and you have yours, and never the twain shall meet, reciprocity and mutuality are effectively enjoined and we can neither give nor receive at life's most dynamic levels.

To decide that one's religion will not be subject to publication is to decide against publishing good tidings of peace and love. It is to

decide against being a witness or an evangelist. Faith is then crippled beyond repair whether it be individual or corporate. In the final analysis, what purports to be invisible religion ensues in something that is dead or nonexistent.

The conclusion is inevitable. Religion is never used more perversely than as a means to and an excuse for our personal privacy. Where communion and unity are most indicated and have the better chance for occurrence, namely religion, disassociation and alienation take place. That is perversity at its zenith.

We must make a choice at this point. Much could be said about the reasons for invisible religion. Emphasis upon honesty; aversion to shame, hypocrisy, and idolatry; the yen to withdraw from technocratic intrusions upon our personal lives: all of these are vastly significant on the scene.

However, it will probably be more fruitful to surmise the means that we use, and which everyone must use, in order to come to the category of invisible religion. Along that line, we can concentrate effectively upon one point. In order to secure and maintain an invisible religion, one must do away with all religious symbols. Religion becomes visible through its symbols. If one opts for an invisible religion, he must discard religious symbols which bring his faith into public notice.

And this is surely what is taking place all along the line. We are trying on a religion that has nothing of the symbolic and we are religiously naked and empty as a result. This is a far cry from our forebears of faith. The one thing about them that stands out is that they were the "*symbolic* people of God."

At the very beginning of their written saga — that we call scripture — the use of symbol is clear. Their relationship with God, beginning in covenant and ending with the alienation of disobedience, was symbolized by the two trees of Eden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Because the first two disobeyed God and plundered the tree of knowledge, they no longer had free access to the tree of life. Such is the drama of the "fall of man" and probably the drama of the fall of the entire creation. A religion professor has shared with me his dismay to learn that his class of students has no idea of what he meant when he spoke of the fallenness of man. They were ignorant of the

doctrine of the fall. And they were most likely ignorant of the drama of the two trees of Eden. I cannot help but wonder how his congregation might fare under similar circumstances. Of one thing I am sure, those of us who want our religion private and invisible cut down both of those trees a long time ago, for their vivid symbols stand athwart any path to a private faith.

When the apostle Paul spoke of the church or churches which he had organized across his world, he referred to them as the "body of Christ." Our text for the morning moves majestically from a reference to the body into Paul's great hymn of love. He has advised the Corinthians that they are the body of Christ and individually members of it. They are cast individually according to their gifts and talents for service. But then Paul speaks of the more excellent way. If I speak with the tongue of men and angels and have not love . . . Surely, we will not claim that he was speaking of private or invisible love. It would corrupt the whole to maintain that Paul was thinking of the love of individuals. He was referring to the loving body of the church. Let each man do what he is gifted to do.

But, although he speaks in first person, it is clear that these individual talents are meaningless without the visible and loving body which he called church.

A major contradiction of the present is that love is increasingly parroted at the same time that invisible religion is on the march. I do not think that contradiction can last. No love can come from an invisible religion. For love always makes religion visible. And that has to mean in the long run that there can be no love in an invisible religion.

This pattern holds true across the board. The late Paul Tillich once wrote, "The individual can devise signs for his own private needs; he cannot make symbols. This is because first of all a symbol must be socially acceptable. That is its initial genius. Furthermore, a symbol is not exchangeable for another symbol to represent the same reality. It cannot be exchanged. It only dissolves and disappears when it loses its inner power."

Tillich has never been easy to understand. But he seems to have said two things in this regard. There are no symbols in invisible religion because symbols must be perceived and appropriated by society. Second, when a symbol disappears, it is not replaced by

another one representing the same reality, but rather it disappears because the reality it has represented is dead and nonexistent.

Before completely disagreeing, perhaps you should try to love another without the use of symbols. Do away with hand shakes and the kiss. Cease the symbolic acts of care and kindness. Maybe you can assure yourself with some private signs that you are a lover. But how can you tell the other. And if you cannot tell another, if you are a lover with no one to love, how long can you convince yourself that love is still at work in you. Before long your love will not only be hidden from another but from yourself as well.

Is it not time to see whether there are meaningful and lasting symbols of faith in our midst? We need not take on the world in this respect; the record of the matter very close at home may be enough to dismay us.

I am sure that this tack will get me into hot water. Since I have never been able to walk even on cold water, I am likely to emerge from this hour as a boiled preacher.

But I first want to say that Wake Forest University cannot maintain a religion if it keeps it invisible. If it persists in letting the symbols of the secular take precedence over the symbols of the saved, it will then be secular not only in appearance but in reality. We were upset to hear and read of the attack upon Baptist Hospital and the medical school and indirectly on the university only last week. But most of that criticism comes because the symbols of faith in these institutions are no longer as evident as they used to be. They are no longer in the showcase but locked up in the closet.

Only yesterday I saw an often repeated sight. A group of youngsters, obviously from a church, possibly a rural Baptist church, were led to the front of the chapel by their sponsors. You could hear their words of expectancy. This is the chapel. Now we are going to see the chapel! But the chapel was locked. A small thing? Not necessarily. It may be locked because so little goes on in here, including what we do, that will properly reflect the architecture.

The table before me sometimes holds a cross and sometimes holds a mace. There is room for both. A mace among other things is an ornament "borne as a symbol of authority before a public official or a legislative body." As it comes down in front of the academic procession at convocation, baccalaureate, commencement, I thrill

to its meaning. It speaks of the freedom of the university to pursue truth, it speaks of the freedom of the president and his staff and faculty. It suggests that the university is made up of these people in the chiefest sense of the years.

But sometimes a cross is here. I think there is room for both. But I will defy any man who says that the mace must completely replace the cross of this is to be a great university. He will then have to contend with me and, I hope, with you. And the only authority I have to take that position is as a soldier of the cross. But if my Lord died for every man, I have a right to speak to him about the Lord.

Which brings us even closer. Will we continue, so many of us, to try to be children of God and not of church. Then we have lost our symbol. Will we remain secretly religious with one another? Will the stranger have to take for granted that he is our friend in Christ, for granted because we never greet him, extend ourselves to him. Maybe the worst thing that has ever happened is that churches should not be known as friendly or unfriendly churches, caring or uncaring churches.

The water has indeed gotten hot, and I had better get out while I can. Let us hope that the steam is not so thick that we cannot see each other's banners, lifted high, making faith visible.

# Guilt and Forgiveness

June 8, 1974

*Habakkuk 1:1-11; John 9:35-41*

*Paulus* is one book I wish I had never read. Subtitled *Reminiscences of a Friendship*, it is Rollo May's account of his times and experiences with the late Paul Tillich, who was one of the theological and philosophical giants of the current century.

I wish that I had not read the book because I am somewhat disappointed in both its subject and its author. I am more disappointed in Rollo May than I am in Tillich. Since I never really understood Tillich and only pretended to do so when trying to impress my peers, my disappointment in him is necessarily restricted. One cannot greatly esteem whom he does not understand and therefore has less esteem to lose when the time comes. Thus the book's disclosures of his unfaithfulness to his wife Hannah, of his frequent and often sadistic sexual experiences outside the marriage, and of his godlike throne of sand on the beaches of the North Sea did not throw me into spasms of dismay.

My major disappointment is with Rollo May, a most distinguished analyst and exciting author. Because of my assumption that I have been able to understand May with his blend of psychiatric and religious orientation, the stance of his life and thought is of real importance to me. My life and ministry have been influenced by Barth, Brunner, Berger, Bultmann, the two Niebuhr brothers, and Michael Novak among modern thinkers and writers. I am also indebted to novelists the like of Peter De Vries, Iris Murdoch, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy on the contemporary scene. I do not think I am trying to parade my erudition or pose as a person of letters as much as I am trying to assert my honest appreciation

for Rollo May. For I would add to this galaxy of the great, according to my estimation, the names of Karl Menninger and Rollo May as two of the greatest figures in psychiatry. May's two latest books, *Love and Will* and *Power and Innocence*, have meant as much to me as anything I have read in the last ten years, more or less.

I am of no mind to discard my books by May nor to discredit his essential worth as a person, psychiatrist, and author. But as a result of reading *Paulus*, I would confront May with the question in the title of Karl Menninger's latest offering, *Whatever Became of Sin?* I am afraid that although May once knew the answer to that question, he has apparently lost it in the secular shuffle.

Although it strikes me as an unusual pose for him, May seems to have looked on Paul Tillich from a perspective akin to that of the prophet, Habakkuk. That is to say, he did not like to see what he saw in Tillich. He saw a powerful figure whose basic flaw was the worship of his own might and strength, which meant that he was not subject to the same principles as average people.

One can almost hear May parroting Habakkuk's cry: "Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? . . . So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth." May falls prey to his own warnings about worshipping the mighty. Either we are so envious as to take joy in the toppling of the strong from their throne or we worship them to the point of being unable to bring judgment upon them. They are excused of their failures and sins which breed our contempt for lesser men.

One way to do this is to give wrong or sin the element of necessity. In Tillich's case, May explains that his sexual libido, sadism, philandering were necessary in the search for his mother, who died when Tillich was a boy of seventeen. Tillich's sexuality is described as sensuality in the service of eros, making of all his illicit relationships a drive to a higher goal. According to May, Tillich's sadism was a desperate attempt to break through the "skin barrier" because of his deep need to reach someone. Or to quote May, "Thus the beloved woman is the way to God, playing a role not unlike Mary in Roman Catholicism." Had not Paulus said at least on one occasion, "Women are closer to God." You must forgive me for a quip. It seems to have escaped May — I cannot say for Tillich — that the Mary of record was a virgin and that the Roman Catholic Church insists that she remained so forever.

Let me be the first to say that there is truth in each of the analyses of Tillich by May. And we ought to be reminded that Tillich is not the first great person, religious or otherwise, to have strayed from the straight and narrow. David and Bathsheba is but one example of this reality.

The deeper bother here is that May, much like the Jesuit priest on the White House staff, seems to think that Tillich's affairs were therapeutic and therefore necessary. Along with the rest of us, May needs the Niebuhrian reminder: ". . . man sins inevitably, yet without escaping responsibility for his sin. This has ushered in the dictum, based on Niebuhr's thought, "Sin is inevitable but not necessary."

Of those with psychological bent, Menninger seems to understand that dictum best of all. In his book, *Whatever Became of Sin*, Menninger traces the shift from sin to crime, thus from church to court, and the shift from crime to sickness, thus from courtroom to the analyst's couch. It is then but a short distance from the idea that since sin is therapeutic, this makes it necessary, which in turn means that it is not sin.

In response to such a position, let us hear again the words of Jesus in that situation when he helped the man who had been blind from birth. "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees asked, not without derision, "Are we also blind?" Jesus replied, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."

Whether by psychological or theological means, or just by common sense, to be able to see, know, and understand one's actions makes him all the more responsible for them. Our modern inclination is to find sociological, psychological, or theological justification for our mistakes and our sins. We fail to admit, in the same context, that this ought to make us more rather than less responsible for what we do. If there is no problem, there is no need for analysis. If analysis, of whatever kind, informs us of the reason for our problem, of the forces which make us sin, then we are both responsible and guilty to a greater rather than a lesser degree.

I am not engaged in the production of guilt complexes and feelings among us. I am constrained to suggest that guilt is a constructive asset to life, if we will accept responsibility and seek

solution. Nor am I discrediting the valuable contribution of psychological insights. In the complexity of life as it now is, the psychiatrist in uncovering the fact of one's guilt complexes, particularly guilt feelings that are not connected with the reality of sin, frees a person to deal with real guilt instead of pseudo-guilt. Too many of us are like the woman whose life was a series of profoundly sinful experiences, but who felt guilty only about stealing some time at her lunch hour to get in thirty minutes of shopping.

Religion takes over when real guilt has been uncovered. That is to say when man has sinned and knows guilt in terms of sin, whether of an individual or corporate nature, man is then in need of forgiveness. In view of the fact that, although he has apparently sinned only against his fellow men, one never sins against a brother without his first sin being against God, forgiveness is always primarily an experience between God and persons. Whether or not a person believes in God has nothing to do with whether or not he has sinned against God. If he offends his fellow man, this is done within the arena of God's creation and God's dominion. Therefore, sin is always in context of sin against God.

I could spin wheels for quite a while arguing against the popular notion that there are enough rules within human ethics to deal with guilt and sin against a brother and to handle the entire matter without recourse to God. Rather than engaging in an endless debate to that end, let us look at forgiveness in the light of God.

First of all sin and guilt deal with fundamental realities in the whole of life. Only from the perspective of transcendence is one able to see the profound dimensions of sin. Let us hope that Patty Hearst is apprehended before she and others are annihilated. We may presume that Miss Hearst is mentally, emotionally, or socio-logically ill. In that case, she would need the best treatment available. But if only this tack were to be taken, Miss Hearst would miss the reality of her own condition. The hatred she now expresses for people and members of her own family can hardly be described or justified in terms of mental illness. Nor may we excuse her as having been brainwashed. She is right, she has not been brainwashed, she is murderously enraged. Her family may or may not be at fault. Who can say? Her background may or may not be relevant. Who can say? What can be said is that her freedom now to

call her loved ones "pigs" is to be understood as sin only in the light of a transcendent dimension, only from the perspective of God. One of the worst things we have done to the young generation is to suggest and believe that they are always sick and never sinful. Thus we give them no chance to know the truth about themselves.

Secondly, it is not within our power to heal the wounds we commit upon others. To be sure we may seek forgiveness from one we have offended and it may be granted. That can heal the estrangement that may have occurred as a result of our offense. This in itself does not guarantee a total healing. Furthermore, we often hurt others without awareness in an individual sense. So in the long run, it is necessary for us to know that we are forgiven by God as well and to believe that his grace is sufficient for those whom we may have hurt. In other words, what God does for the hurt that we impose upon others is always more than we may do no matter how good our intentions.

A final reality, often overlooked by us, is what we may do as the result of guilt unforgiven. All too often, in this context we may overdo the work of compensation. A philandering father, an alcoholic mother, a rebellious child, each or all will sometimes feel so great a burden of guilt as to think they are totally responsible for the tragedy that may strike. Then over-indulgence of children, or the absence of demand and fidelity necessary to marriage, or the openness of genuine friendships are lost in the welter of one who tries to make up for his sins. Forgiveness is not cheap but it is liberating. And when we confess our sins, our guilt is then forgiven, and we are free to live with others in the best possible sense.



# On Explaining Ourselves to God

October 9, 1983

*Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17, 3:22-24; Luke 23:32-38*

It takes as much knowledge, perhaps more, in today's world to be a prophet as it takes courage. In other words, whoever will proclaim God to the world must also explain God. Whoever will declare the word of God must also explain the word of God. A widespread skepticism brought to bear partially, I would assume, from the knowledge explosion has put the preaching of the gospel somewhat on the defensive. Religion has always called this defensive preaching by the fancy word *apologetics*, but it does add up to a kind of an apology and to somewhat of an explanation of God. The pulpit is on the defensive, the church is on the defensive, and therefore to some extent, at the hands of the pulpit and the church, God is on the defensive.

I have found this to be true, certainly, in my own preaching. As a prophet I have become more and more the apologist, dealing in apologetics. The more one thunders, "Woe is you if you are not a believer, if you do not obey the will of God," the more one discovers that God has to be explained. I find myself, even as I fancy myself as a prophet, somehow saying, "Please, even pretty please, hear the word of God, do the will of God, not so much for your own sake, but for God's sake and perhaps for the sake of the church."

The main difference in all of this from times past is that one has always had to be an apologist to the world, to the unbeliever. But now one must deal apologetically and in apologetics with the church. So it is not only to the world outside that I must explain God and explain the word of God, I must do it also to you, and you

must do it for me. One is tempted always in this kind of situation to thunder all the more as a courageous prophet in stentorian and articulate terms. But that will be to no avail; people are no longer frightened by God. So how may we get God off the defensive?

I think perhaps the role of today's pulpit is, as often as not, to turn from being prophet to being priest. For if it be true that the prophet speaks for God, represents God and, therefore, in our society has to explain God, then I would suppose that the priest who speaks for the people to God, represents the people to God, must also, therefore, explain the people to God and, in this case, explain ourselves. That may indeed put us on the defensive. Think for a moment how you would explain yourselves to God today — in this priesthood of believers that we embrace, how you, speaking for yourself, would explain yourself to God. And since we are not only priest to self in the priesthood of believers but also priest to one another, then let us raise that other question: How may I explain you to God? How should I represent you to God? And how may you represent me and speak for me and explain me to God?

I am sure that we would not be satisfied with the kinds of explanations that come out of some of the central stories of the Old Testament. Adam, when talking for himself about the reason that he plundered the forbidden tree, said in effect, "Well, God, I didn't do it. The woman that you gave me brought me that fruit, and since the damage had already been done, I saw no reason not to eat it." Now, the fact of the matter is that Adam squealed on his wife. But she was only an afterthought, right? How do you like that explanation for disobedience?

Then there was Jeremiah, one of the times when Jeremiah gave up being a prophet for being a priest. The Lord had said to Jeremiah, "Go into the streets of Jerusalem because Jerusalem is in trouble. But I will spare Jerusalem; if you will go into the streets and find one truthful person, one just person there, I will spare the whole city." Jeremiah didn't even bother to go. He said, "Lord, the street people of Jerusalem are poor, and because they are poor, they don't have any sense; and because they are poor and don't have any sense, they are, therefore, not honest, or truthful, or just. So I'm not even going to look." What a priest! And do you know, that kind of mentality still exists today. We continue to insult the poor by saying

that if they're poor, they have no sense, they don't know any better, and their lack of justice and truthfulness is justified because they are blighted by poverty. What an insult to the poor! Had I lived in Jeremiah's time, I would have said, "My friend, you are a great prophet, but if you do not mind, I'll find me another priest, because the way you would explain me to God is not according to my liking."

And then there was Jonah, explaining himself to God and saying, in effect, "I didn't go to Nineveh, and the reason I've been running from you is that if I went to Nineveh and I preached your word, those people would repent. You are a soft-hearted God, and you would forgive all of them and redeem them. So I didn't go because I want Nineveh to go to hell." Another explanation.

These are only three, not very comforting, not very promising, but about the way that we would be, I think, if we had to be priest for ourselves or priest for one another in explaining ourselves to God.

I never realized until recently that the most incredible event in the New Testament time, that most shattering occasion of all of history has no explanation except by the one who was the victim of it. I'm talking about the cross, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Read all the stories of the crucifixion that you will; the only explanation is given by the one who hangs there. The victim of the cross becomes the priest to the people who crucified him. His explanation is "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Father, forgive them, they think they're doing the right thing. They do not know what they're doing." Now let us not have to do at all with the lame excuse that that's something that happened a long time ago and has been alternately blamed upon Roman and Jew. If you accept the forgiveness of Christ at all, then you're a participant in the event of the cross. You and I are ones who make the victim, and the victim for us becomes the priest who says to forgive us because we do not know what we're doing.

Modern day thinkers have an explanation for the crucifixion. The likes of Rollo May and Paul Tillich and others have suggested by indirection, and sometimes even directly, that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was an act of human creativity. Rollo May in particular, says that if you're going to be authentic in your human creativity,

you have to do battle with the gods. And the assumption of May and other modern minds is that God rejoices only when he can keep us stupid and therefore obedient. May quotes with relish from a letter written by George Bernard Shaw to Heifitz, the master violinist, after the Shaws had attended one of his superb violin concerts. It went something like this:

My dear Mr. Heifitz,

Mrs. Shaw and I were overwhelmed by the concert. If you continue to play with such perfection, you will certainly die young, for playing with such perfection will provoke the jealousy of the gods. We earnestly implore you to play something very badly every night before you go to sleep . . .

May stakes out that position, of course, by comparing the myth of Prometheus and the myth of Adam and Eve. Says Dr. May (and remember, he was a student of Tillich's), "Prometheus had to steal fire from Zeus; he had to steal it from the heaven, because Zeus wanted to deprive the human beings of civilization. And in the same way Adam and Eve had to raid the tree because this symbolizes the dawn of human consciousness and or moral conscience." May would argue that had Adam and Eve not plundered that tree, they would not have been conscious and they would not have had any morality.

Let's look at that comparison. First of all, Zeus and Prometheus were already out of sorts with one another. They had been carrying one quite a battle and contest. Adam and Eve were the crown of God's creation. Secondly, the people had already had fire, and Zeus took it away from them. When Prometheus stole into heaven to steal the fire, he was restoring or recovering for the people something they had already enjoyed. But in the myth of Eden, Eden was that perfect place which from the beginning had the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which man was not supposed to eat, but could eat freely of the tree of life. In the third comparison, Prometheus had to steal the fire, but Eve did not have to steal the apple. There was no fence around that tree; there was no barrier; there was no need for the cover of night. God was not monitoring the tree and did not know that any fruit was missing until he saw the actions of Adam and Eve after he could run them down. The

tree had open access. And, finally, there is no Satan in the myth of Prometheus. But there is a Satan, a serpent, in Eden. The symbol is that the rape of the tree was prompted by the unrighteous one, which leaves May and others suggesting that the search for the knowledge of good and evil is prompted by the unrighteous one.

I'd like to say two other things about Eden that are not drawn from the comparison. The people were told they might eat freely from every other tree of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but this, as I have hinted, did not mean that there was a fence around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The word freely here means "You may eat of every other tree without cost, at no sacrifice to yourself. It won't cost you a thing. You can have the tree of life for nothing, but if you eat of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it's going to cost you. You can't have that one freely." Now, much is made of the fact that God, because man had become like him — knowing good and evil — he must ban him from the tree of life. What man learned from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was that there is good and evil; but man did not know good and evil like God — never has known good and evil like God. And because man knew the presence of morality, the existence of morality, because man knew that, unless he also knew the difference and could determine the difference, which he could not, he could not be allowed to live forever to perpetuate the misunderstanding of good and evil.

How shall I explain you and me to God today? Shall we have as our priest Rollo May, who, in effect, says, "If you're going to be creative as human beings, you must disobey the gods, you must be in battle with the gods, indeed even if it means the death of God, that's what you have to do?" Or shall we let the victim of the crucifixion, the only one to give an explanation for it, who says of us, "They do not know what they are doing," also be our priest? For the most part of my ministry, I've always looked upon that saying as grace and nothing else — as Jesus trying to make some kind of lame excuse for the people before God in his graceful redemption and atonement for them — but now I think that he meant exactly what he said. For the first time, this becomes a descriptive statement, and Christ from the cross was saying about men and about you and me, "They really do not know what they are doing. They

ate the fruit but it didn't work. They really think they are doing a good thing; they are preserving the faith of their fathers, they are stabilizing and preserving the order of the Roman Empire; they really think they are doing a good thing, God. They don't know what they're doing." And so Christ, from that tree of Golgotha, talked about the tree in Eden and said it didn't work. And Christ kept faith with the idea throughout his whole life.

There is another saying which has been so hard for me to understand, when on two occasions someone came to Christ and said, "Good Master" or asked, "What is good?" and Jesus said, "Why do you call me good?" or "Why do you ask me about what is good? No one is good save the Father, and no one knows good save the Father." He said over and over again, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me." In effect, our Savior and Lord, the Son of God, was saying what we've been unwilling to say. That is, he was saying, "I never picked an apple from that tree and I don't intend to. I do not, even in my own special place with God — I do not in any way pretend to determine good and evil. That is up to the Father.

I explain myself, therefore, to God in your presence in this way: I do not have any ultimate sense of what is good and evil. Oh, I know the difference between right and wrong sufficiently so to be half-way civilized. And I think that I am moral, with qualifications. But I cannot codify it into law; I cannot frame it into an epic. Ultimately, I depend upon God to make that decision for me. Are you going to let anybody else make an absolute for you? And around here do we not say while we think man may grasp knowledge, really the pursuit of it is the fun? God alone must be allowed absolutely to determine between good and evil. Therefore, I rejoice that the victim of the cross said for those people and for us and for all coming generations, "Father, they do not know what they are doing." That is my explanation, and he therefore is my savior; and if I have to make explanation for you, that is what I shall say. We, you and I, do not know, but Christ, who is victim of our ignorance, is the Savior of our lives. Amen.

#### ADDENDUM:

A rather important omission in this particular sermon concerns what did result symbolically as a consequence of eating from the forbidden tree. While Adam and Eve learned little or

nothing about the distinction between good and evil and failed to gain power for making determinations between the two, they did acquire a measure of moral responsibility because of their disobedient action. This acquirement of moral sensitivity and responsibility is signified by the fact that before Adam and Eve ate of the tree, they were naked but not ashamed. Afterwards, their eyes were opened and they were ashamed. Realistic experience is herein being symbolized; modern man and woman in their attempt to determine the nature of good and evil simply wind up with greater moral responsibility but without a greater capacity for being righteous.



# Character

*February 21, 1982*

*Micah 6:3-8; Romans 5:1-11*

We have not appreciably changed our materials for the "road to hell." We are still paving it with good intentions. Whether we are the world's people or God's people, to live the good or Christian life to the tune of our good intentions is as disharmonious as the worst note that ever embarrassed a symphony. Does this mean that we are hypocrites? It does not, and flailing away at hypocrisy whenever honorable intentions are descriptive as our motives is hitting the wrong key.

Paul's failure to live the Christian life, was not the consequence of his hypocrisy. As can be seen from Romans 7, the rightness of his intent lay behind his confession "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Most of us find Paul hard to understand in many cases, but we have little trouble perceiving his problem in this instance. We know the experience of being unable to do as well as we wish and of doing that which we hate, which we would avoid doing if it were within our capacity.

Treating Paul or ourselves with some strong, even harsh, antidote for hypocrisy is not only unkind and unfair, it is also irrelevant and fruitless. The failure to understand one's actions, under such circumstances, points to a lack of knowledge and wisdom. Although no one lives up to the best of one's knowledge, no one does the best that is possible, it is a mistake to assume that this is only source of our difficulty. Such a perversity of will is not to be discounted entirely but we need to recognize also that our deficiency is due not only to a perverse will but to a lack of knowledge.

Eden's delectable fruit turned sour because the man and the woman there were denied the knowledge they pursued. So anxious were they to be like God, that is, to have his determinative knowledge respecting the matter of knowing good and evil, that they disobeyed God, to the end that the considerable knowledge they had already been given was now forever impaired. Men and women have ever since tried to regain the knowledge lost in Eden and thus have tried to know more than is possible.

But there is another aspect of the problem which has not been understood nor treated with good effect. Let me suggest that Adam and Eve's failure was due also to a lack of character. Let me dare say that Paul suffered the same deficiency. And let me risk the observation that our own failures stem as much from character deficiency as from anything else.

Although the basic theme of this sermon has to do with lack of character and the need, therefore, for character formation, such an emphasis needs to be made with due consideration for how a lack of knowledge has thwarted our endeavors at living the Christian life. In other words, character formation should be studied in light of those failures due to a lack of knowledge. Although in some instances the failures of the world's people are identical to those of God's people, I leave you to draw the parallels and will confine my own remarks to those of us who belong to the family of God.

Our lack of knowledge has caused us to believe that the Christian life may be assured by attaining virtue, a virtue belonging to the natural goodness of human nature which may be recovered and confirmed by conforming to certain duties and acts which are virtuous by nature. Roman Catholicism has been the chief agent of this view and has thought to augment the achievement of virtue by offering sure grace transmitted by sacraments. The primary effect has been one of making virtue synonymous with the receiving of the sacraments. Protestants are known by their refusal to believe that virtue is assured by sacramental action, because such a view fails to account for the reality of falleness and for the necessity of change in the life of the person.

In distinction from this generally Catholic view, Protestants have endeavored to live the Christian life by what Stanley Hauerwas describes as a command-obedience principle, obeying law or doing

the will of God. The command-obedience metaphor may be applied to our attempt to do our moral duty by obeying religious laws or ethics. As Hauerwas points out, there is more to our moral situation than there is to our principles and rules: "So much of our significant moral experiences and life simply does not fall within the area marked off by clearly defined principles." Thus the attempt to obey ethical commands signifies a lack of knowledge by which to deal with life's larger ambiguities. "Situation ethics," as developed by Joseph Fletcher and others, was once thought to be a solution to the problem caused by the limitation of principles with regard to the complexity of life. But "situation ethics," with its insistence that "right and wrong depend on the situation" leaves the self at the mercy of each new event, that is the self becomes what the situation calls for; the question of what kind of person is brought to the situation and what kind of person, therefore, emerges from the yonder side of it is not entertained.

Performing the will of God, as the basis for living the good life, presents two difficulties near to being insurmountable. Our lack of knowledge makes it impossible for us to know God's will unless and until he reveals it to us. We have no capacity of our own for knowing God's will, and his will cannot be fitted into our moral and ethical presuppositions. And upon knowing his will, when it is so revealed, we are powerless before its demand unless he supplies the power. We know of no other source giving us power to do God's will outside of his gracious gift of that power.

Because of their limitations, due as they are to our lack of knowledge, the formation of character cannot depend upon a recovery of natural goodness through sacramental transmission, cannot depend upon command-obedience response to moral obligation, and cannot depend upon knowing and doing the will of God. It would be too much to say that character has no association with virtue, moral duty, or the doing of God's will, but neither may character be too closely identified with these categories.

Richard John Neuhaus has put as well as anyone I know the meaning of character and what it implies for the living our lives. "That we are new beings in Christ," Neuhaus observed, "is God's sheer gift; the construction of character is the actualization of that gift. It is the painstaking process of becoming who, in Christ, we

already are." If we are sufficiently aware that this definition must not be taken to mean the achievement of virtue already latent within us or of realizing ourselves as the good persons we always have been, it is then a safe definition. Character has to do with becoming new persons rather than a faithful replica of what we have always been. As to what kind of life is thereby indicated, "Character implies the courage and grace to live the good life in a world where needs go largely unmet."

If I may make use of the views of Hauerwas and Neuhaus as points of departure, while evaluating these and other notions from the vantage of the authority of scripture, I should like to describe the formation of character as a moral and ethical experience, which is never complete but is always open to new possibility, which is a matter of maintaining the integrity of the person as one endures life in the tragic dimension, and which is a matter of a person responding rightly to life's situations characteristically rather than by choosing and doing the right thing. The latter is a matter of primary significance. A person of character will do what is done characteristically rather than wait until a situation arises and then decide upon what is right and wrong.

Let us hasten now to the words of Micah. His prophetic ministry had disturbed people. They wanted to know how they might appease an angry God. And so they said, How about burnt offerings of yearling calves? How about thousands of rams? How about ten thousands of rivers of oil? Or even our first born children? For the most part we have interpreted these verses as reflecting the inadequacy of ritual sacrifices as substitutes for moral duty. And there can be no question but that such interpretation is a reasonable one. But with respect to the formation of character, it is clear that Micah's parish wanted to enter into some contract with God which, if fulfilled, would get God off their backs. Far from being open to all possibilities, they wanted to close the matter as soon as they could and then go on about their business.

Micah countered with the necessity for doing justice and loving kindness. To this extent the prophet appealed to moral duty. But when he added the necessity of walking humbly with God, he left the matter open ended, with every new possibility very much in the picture. In order to see how easily we slip back to seeking virtue

by obedience to moral duty, think of what the words "walk humbly with God" usually means to us. Do we not, if taking these words seriously, determine that we ought to be humble, thus achieving the virtue of humility. We must not let the adverb obscure the need to walk with God, whether humbly or not, and to realize that in walking with God, neither knowing that we must do this or that, but must walk with him who does not always tell us what to do, we are remaining open to possibility. The emphasis here, with respect to Micah's prophecy, should not be upon doing justice, or loving kindness, or being humble, because in the formation of character the stress is not open whether or not an action is good or bad but upon what kind of person emerges from the actions that are taken.

Do I dare to use John Updike's woman, in a *Month of Sundays*, as an illustration of character? She was quite willing to have a sexual affair, one of adultery, with the womanizing preacher of her church. But the preacher found that he was sexually impotent in this particular relationship. His impotence, he was convinced, stemmed from the fact that the woman was a believer. And so the preacher tried with all his might to persuade the woman to recant her faith, to deny God and his love for her and the preacher, with the hope that her apostasy would cure his impotence. Although she remained a willing partner for the adulterous affair, she would not deny God. I risk the observation that the woman had character. I admit that more acceptable and less extreme examples might be forthcoming, but few which might offer a more graphic illustration of the difference between moral duty and character. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the possibilities of the affair were not realized not because the woman did her moral duty but because she had character. The affair came to an end not because of her obedience to moral principles but because of the kind of a person she was.

Paul's splendid reference in Romans 5 undergirds the whole of our premise: character is a matter of retaining one's integrity, one's unity of being, for the duration of experiences, whether good or bad. He began by saying that as Christians we may, or ought to, or do rejoice in our hopes of sharing the glory of God. This allows us to rejoice in our sufferings, not because suffering is enjoyable, and not because — mark well — suffering produces character. In and of

itself suffering has never produced character; the endurance produced by suffering is what produces character in turn. And character produces the hope of sharing in the glory of God which Paul had mentioned in the first place.

Hear it well! Character is hoping. As Christians we are under moral duty to do justice. We are under God's command to love God and neighbor. The same may be said for truth, goodness, perhaps even beauty. It is our duty to love truth, goodness and beauty. But there is no moral duty to hope; no ethical obligation is thereby entailed. Jesus often said he that endures to the end shall be saved because, perhaps, endurance brings the kind of hope that lasts until salvation has come in all fullness and with the glory of God.

What is character? Some summers back I had gone with my hosts to Bear Island, off the coast near Swansboro, for a day of seeing the natural delights of the place and for some swimming in the surf. No sooner had we arrived when the wind began to assert itself, and the lifeguards closed the beach so that no swimming would be allowed. As we walked back to catch a ferry to the mainland, I noticed a fisherman — with every appearance of being a native — readying his gear in order to do some surf fishing. By this time, we were trying to keep from toppling sideways against the gale coming off the water. So I said to him, "Sir, do you expect to do any casting and catch any fish against this wind?" "Hoping to," he replied, and then with a grin he said, "Fishing ain't much more than hoping anyhow."

I wish I knew that man. Had I not been with others, chances are that I might have stayed around in order to get to know him. Oh, to be sure, I might have heard some choice profanity if and when his lines got snarled because of that capricious gale. But I wanted to know him because he struck me as having character, as one who knows life as well as he knew fishing — so much of it is hope.

The old times in my Baptist upbringing had about as much to say about growing in grace as they did about grace. Becoming what in Christ we already are is consonant with the idea of growing in grace. And to grow in grace is to grow in the hope of it. It is to live through whatever might be with heart, head, and soul together for the duration. Growing in grace is becoming a person more than achieving moral victory. One has grown in grace when he or she

emerges from moral and ethical failure still a person of hope, still waiting for the second coming, still walking with God without knowing where one may be going.

In the final analysis, character is celebrating life in every condition with characteristic hope. I do not dare call them by name, but most of you will recognize these beloved friends who were once members of this church. They lived long and faithfully and beautifully, but they outlived the age when pain was no more. His hearing was impaired, she was blind, and had broken both hips. They were not stingy, but very frugal, because when they left this life, they wanted to leave as much money as possible to Baptist work. For a while they took Meals on Wheels, but quit this service because the food was not tasty enough to their liking. Some of their friends insisted that I should check on whether or not they were getting the right kind of diet, since they had no prepared meals. I went out one wintry afternoon about 1:00 p.m. to check on their nutritional habits. They had a roaring fire in the grate, and were just about to have lunch. I was invited to join them, so we settled down in the den before a repast of delicious peanuts, chocolate eclairs from their favorite bakery, and ice-cold Pepsi. This food had not destroyed them before they reached their octogenerial years; this is what they wanted to eat. It was a celebration of life in a manner which was characteristic of these two dear friends. So the three of us spent the next hour and a half building character! Amen.



# Experiences of Joy

*June 19, 1977*

*Isaiah 56:1-8; I Peter 1:1-9*

I do not believe there is any joy in suffering per se. However, I know some people who make that appear to be the case. Through the worst throes of their distress, they maintain joy in such a way as to make one wonder if they do not enjoy suffering after all. Of course, this is not what is going on, it only seems to be that way.

Whenever we encounter these rare souls, and there are too few of them, it is like finding a blooming flower in a heap of junk, hearing an encouraging word in a din of criticism, tasting a sweet streak in a fallen cake, or seeing the face of a beloved friend among a sea of strangers. Although such individuals are few in number, they count far more than their small aggregate might suggest. Except for the consultation and hope we may receive from God through prayer, in our times of distress, these are the people who pull our eyes out of their downcast glance, and stiffen our backs, and jerk our shoulders out of the sagging curve, inspiring us to give life another stab, to look again to the dawn, and to keep on keeping on with our lives of faith. Even if we do not see them during the time of a given ordeal, the memory of their gallant stance in their suffering is enough to rescue us from self-pity and make us too ashamed to give up.

I am not speaking of the stoics who plod through life without the slightest change of expression on their face or in their demeanor. I am not referring to people who have dulled their sense of caring to the extent that the blows of suffering have little effect. I am not thinking of people with a knack for rolling with the punches so as to dodge or absorb suffering's sledgehammer blows. And I could

not be commanding masochists, who perversely enjoy every misery which blows up a storm around their lives.

The people who seem to know the secret of joy, and of whom I speak, are Christians for whom life has much meaning, who are called upon to care about the plight of others to a profound degree, and who theologically understand pain and suffering to be associated with the underside of life rather than its better one.

Their secret, and I believe they have one, is that they maintain joy through suffering because, in quiet and inobtrusive ways, they have achieved joy long before suffering has made its way into their lives or notice. These roads to joy are indeed so commonplace as to escape one's attention unless one has paid every strict attention. This means that one does not start rummaging for joy, like a package stored somewhere on the shelf, to be opened up only when suffering has become a reality. It is not sedation in the medicine cabinet to be dosed down at the first twinge of pain. It is not a prescription of autosuggestion by which one persuades himself "I am suffering, but I must be joyful."

I am sure that the joy the people in question have has been there for a good while before the suffering has settled in. And this joy has been rich enough and powerful enough so that suffering has not been able to quench it, or eliminate it, or weaken it to the extent that it no longer exists in times of distress.

Our question should be obvious by now: What do Christian people do in order to know joy in fair times or foul?

Let me add this parenthesis. The answer may appear so simple as to tempt each one of us to take it frivolously rather than seriously. If you should have that temptation, perhaps you should ask yourself whether or not you have ever tried what is being suggested, before discounting it entirely. Furthermore, the formula is not really designed for chasing headlong in pursuit of joy. It is rather something, which if painfully practiced, seems to produce joy in a more subtle manner. It is with us before we know it.

In the first place, Christians have testified time and again about the joy they have received as a result of worshipping God in a fellowship of faithful people. Christians are not the originators of this experience. The prophet Isaiah promised the eunuch and alien, if they did not profane the Sabbath, if they held to the covenant,

they would be joyful in the Lord's house of prayer. Their sacrifices would be acceptable in the sight of the Lord.

Too many churches miss the fundamental note in this promise. They try to assure a happy and joyful time in worship, that is, make certain that the service is a happy one. So they contrive for a happy fellowship, peppy music, slick litanies — all designed to be a happy time in the house of the Lord.

These endeavors miss the mark; they are a false start to joy. Or perhaps I should say that this is my personal view of the matter. I am able to receive joy from worship in your midst, when the service is dragging, the music is abominable, and the sermon — mostly and largely by my own doing — is a catastrophe. My joy is based on the fact that if I show up here at 11:00 a.m., on the Lord's day, some earnest souls will be in this place, worshipping God and accepting me, and with an ear to hear both my joy and my sorrow. Not everyone will greet me gladly, some not at all, and others with complaints or criticisms, that I would as soon not hear. But no matter, there will be faith and prayer and listening out for the will of God. There will be praise, confession, thanksgiving, and intercession. So when I come I have put a large down payment on joy, and if I keep coming, I will be keeping up with my installments.

I suggest again. Do not discount this unless you have faithfully tried it.

Joy is also the consequence of faith and confident hope. I am theologically turned off — although I am less sure of myself than I used to be — by people who seem so certain that all things, good or bad, are the expressions of God's will. Even if I am not quite ready to say that this is the case in the most minute particulars, as they seem to say, I have seen people like this bury parents, spouses, and children, lose jobs and friends, watch their houses burn down, their children go awry, and life in general become skewed, hang onto joy without fail.

The old guy actually laughed in my face. I was a guest preacher in Clayton, North Carolina, and went with the resident minister to the hospital to visit this old codger who had just been told he had terminal cancer. I expressed condolence and consolation, and told him that I thought life had played a cheap trick on him, and he smiled, even grinned, at me, reached in the drawer beside his bed

and gave me a card that he had faithfully distributed during most of his life, as a kind of cheerful joke. It went like this: If life hands you a lemon, squeeze it and start a lemonade stand.

Now mind you, he did not have those cards printed after going to the hospital; he had been scattering them all over eastern North Carolina for years. Now he was simply practicing what he had been preaching.

"In this you rejoice," wrote the author of I Peter, "though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuiness of your faith . . . may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

One does not have such faith because of joy, but one has joy because of this kind of faith. Some of us, perhaps every one of us, in varying degrees and coming from different standpoints, can testify — come think of it — to the fact that we have been able to be certain, during our sufferings, that "Christ is Lord! God's will is good. I believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." We have captured a joy which will not let us go. One of the most joyful statements, however sombre it may seem, is:

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away

Blessed be the name of the Lord!

In the third and final place, those who do witness, make proclamation, declare the goodness of God, the redemption of Christ, and the coming of the kingdom, build a cornucopia of joy which cannot be exhausted.

No matter your personal condition, or what goes wrong with family, or how low the bank balance, or how you dread tomorrow, if you declare the gospel to someone, make your witness of God's gift of salvation, preach repentance and mercy, you will know joy.

I shall not forget her weeping in the hospital, weeping until she died, not because of her sickness, but because of her grief that other people could not afford a good hospital, a splendid core of skilled doctors, and all the good things she had. There she was, preaching a social gospel from her dying bed and scolding me and the rest of the world because too many people, because of ignorance, remoteness, or poverty, do not receive the best in medical care.

I tried to get her to think of herself and she would not. I wanted her to think of herself, because I would be more comfortable that

way, instead of her preaching to me. But she would not. And I believe she might even have taken some joy in seeing me squirm. But her great joy was in giving witness. It was a joy which no one could take away.

Worship, faith, proclamation: these are the sources of joy unbounded for those of us, who claim to follow Christ. Is it not too bad that we let these treasures pass us by when they are so available to each of us?



# Loyalty

September 12, 1982

*Daniel 3:13-18; I Timothy 1:12-17*

Although it seldom appears as a word in the scriptures, *loyalty* is one of the many faces of faith. Other words are *trust, commitment, belief, venture, hope* and *justification*. And these are the ones more readily to be seen these days in the gallery of Christianity. *Loyalty* seems to have been taken down from its usual place on the wall either because it is no longer appropriate as a picture of faith or because it is in need of repair and restoration. I opt for the second explanation. It remains an appropriate representation of faith but one which has been sadly neglected in these days of heightened individuals, of the phenomenon of "me-ism", to such a degree as to be in bad condition. Let me urge you to join with me in restoring *loyalty* to its rightful place in the gallery of our faith.

Endeavoring to do so needs no other justification than the truth that God's engagement with his people, in a covenant faith, is chiefly characterized by steadfastness, endurance, or loyalty. In other words, the major elements that God brings to the covenant of faith are grace and loyalty. The divine fidelity is indispensable to the covenant, and it thereby is also true that the loyalty of God's people is indispensable to the keeping of the covenant.

But in doing so, let us not cheapen loyalty — denying the right to make those kinds of critical judgments. We cannot be as loyal as God — indeed should not be. As has been suggested, individual and collective loyalty receive little or no priority on the contemporary lists of human values. We have been conditioned to be cautious in our allegiances. As a whole, the age is marked by calculative persons. We hesitate at marriage vows, at joining institutions, at

patriotism, even at friendships where loyalty is required. Our tendency is to defer loyalty until it constitutes the least possible risk. It does not occur to us that loyalty is probably a prelude to commitment, and consequently we engage in tentative commitments as a means of deciding what persons or things are to be given our allegiance. But a commitment, even thought to be a tentative one, is actually not a commitment of any kind unless it is preceded by loyalty. Loyalty must occur before commitment if commitment is to mean anything at all. In the last analysis we do not make commitments and then decide to be loyal. It is a basic loyalty out of which commitments are made.

Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego — these were their Babylonian names — from most every indication had decided to be loyal before King Nebuchadnezzar threatened to fry them in his fiery furnace. Theirs was not a spontaneous, on-the-spot allegiance. The calm and cool, matter-of-fact, nature of their reply of Nebuchadnezzar suggests that they had anticipated just such an eventuality in their lives. Their Jewish names, Hennaniah, Mishael, and Azariah, given here in the same sequence as their Babylonian titles, meant respectively "Yahweh has been gracious," and "Yahweh has helped" and indicated their pious and faithful ancestry. "Who is like God is," — the possible interpretation of Mishael — is an imaginative blow against idolatry.

However, the two most imaginative and telling assumptions about the story is they apparently answered in unison, and had probably already faced the question of what they should do if God gave them no sign that he would deliver them from the burning fiery furnace. Thus the three spoke as one — may we suppose they had even rehearsed their answer — and they were quite ready to deal with the possibility that God would not snatch them from the fire.

I would like to suggest that it was within this context and these implications that they responded to the king's threat with these words, "O Nebuchadnezzar we have no need to answer you this matter," meaning that they had already decided that their ultimate allegiance was not to the monarch. "If it be so, our God we serve is able to deliver us out of your hand, O king." (He can save us if he chooses) "but if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not

serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up." Some translators, admitting to the difficulty of this verse in the original suggest a paraphrase: "If God is, he is able to deliver us, and he will." In this case, the *if not* could even refer to the possibility that the god whom they served did not even exist. Consider this alternative, "but if not" was said not only to the possibility that God would not elect to save the three but perhaps that he would not be able to. Therefore, loyalty was pledged to God, who might turn his back upon their distress or might be limited in power so as to be unable to save them. Here we have loyalty to a less than omnipotent god, loyalty to a limited god, loyalty which is indeed a risk, daring allegiance not only to a god who will not but possibly one who cannot.

Such loyalty is seldom developed in the instant or instance; it demands some planning and cultivation before the events calling for fidelity come to pass.

In speculating upon those traits which lend themselves to loyalty, I risk the observation that if you show me the person who refuses every possibility of prejudice, I will show you one who is loyal to nothing. Many of our loyalties are built primarily upon prejudice but I do not think the world is any worse for all that. Shadrach and company did not know all there was to know about Yahweh. We find ourselves being loyal to persons before their worth or merit. Some loyalties are the consequence of our birth, that is, to whom we were born and where. Out of this experience, loyalty to family, to childhood friends and school playmates, and to nation occurs without thought, or judgment, or appraisal. This is my family, these are my friends, this is my nation; it is that simple, and loyalty is implicit in all such experiences.

A logical assumption would be that when one achieves the capacity to see parents, childhood friends, and one's nation with greater honesty and realism, loyalty would be based upon an honest assessment of their deserving of one's allegiance. But if loyalty is determined only by this kind of objective realism, and if loyalty is withdrawn from family, friends, or nation because it is not deserved by any or all of these, then family, friendships, and nation are not likely to endure.

Other loyalties are less prejudiced but not to the degree we might

suppose. We get married for better or for worse, thus the fidelity and the allegiance is not to be withdrawn when one's spouse appears at his or her worst. The choice of friends, at one's maturity, should be more judicious than those back in our childhood neighborhood, but once friends are chosen we ought to be prejudiced in their favor. The same may be said for school and for church. Even if Wake Forest was your second, third, or even fourth choice, now that you are here, the university should enjoy your prejudice in its behalf. One need not insist that it is the best university in the country in order to be loyal to it. One must be loyal because of the choice that has been made. The same may be said for churches. Fortunately, no church has to be one's second choice, except for the fact that spouse or family or the place of one's residence may have some effect upon the church we choose. But once we have chosen, our loyalty to it should not be entirely dependent upon its deserving. If you are hearing me correctly, you are hearing the strong and unequivocal suggestion that loyalty depends greatly upon grace, not only at the beginning but throughout the enterprise of faithfulness.

In the second place, in order to be loyal one must look with prejudiced eye upon that to which allegiance has been given. This is to say that one must develop a means of seeing that which is loved always at its best. I have never dealt with a troubled marriage unless one or the other of its partners had not developed a highly critical eye which is capable of detecting the slightest flaw in the spouse. Doing marriage counseling, I am soon able to detect the chances of restoration of that marriage on the basis of whether or not a person is quick to agree, even to exploit, some criticism I might raise, rather than coming quickly to his or her defense.

A bit later on, I will speak to the need of accepting or forgiving the faults of other persons or things to which we are loyal in order to remain so. But I do not hesitate to suggest that loyalty has a delightful myopia to such flaws, making them harder to see than they might be under other circumstances.

The point is that if we are able, without much effort, to see the fault of the person or thing to which we have given allegiance, our allegiance and loyalty are already worthy or suspicion. Love and loyalty are blind. Having at one time coached football, I cannot see a Wake Forest team with exactly the kind of blind loyalty that

others do, unable as they are to detect its weaknesses and flaws. It matters not to them what the season may bring, they simply add up losses to chance and cheer for their team regardless of its imperfection.

And this leads to the fact that loyalty also demands forgiveness. At the present time, our football team is one and one or two and nothing, as the case may be. Those who are blind to the possibilities of future losses can live with their myopic enthusiasm, those who know the probabilities of a losing season must be ready to forgive in order to be loyal. This is not at all easy. When we have been loyal by virtue of being blind to flaws and then are forced to acknowledge them because they are so apparent, it is harder to be loyal because we feel that we have been betrayed, made fools of, when what needs remembering is that the flaws were there all the while; we simply refused to see them. Now that we are made to see them, loyalty depends more upon forgiveness than upon myopia.

Even so, and in matters more important than athletic games, one's loyalty to marriage, family, friends, nation, school, church rests often upon pardon and forgiveness. It means visiting the friend in prison, staying with the marriage when it is more burden than joy, sticking with the nation in its terrible times of adjustment, staying with the church when it fails at its mission, even going with Christ to his cross when this represents the last thing we expect or want.

Finally, loyalty is a matter of integrity. The very integrity that removes us from covenants when they are no longer bearable — are mutually destructive, thus meaning that to stay with them is the wrong thing; this integrity is also that which makes for loyalty. Loyalty depends upon the word we give, the covenant deed we perform, the character we exhibit in all of our relationships. There are times when a friendship must be discontinued, when a marriage must be dissolved, when parents and or children must go their separate ways, when nation, school, and church must be forsaken. But never without pain and turmoil. For example, I have been here long enough to see a goodly number of people leave this church. Some of them did so with great pain and sorrow, and I did not enjoy talking with them while they were making their decision. But I respect them, could wish them well, and knew that the

church to which they were now going would benefit from their allegiance. They had joined this church in good conscience, were leaving it because of conscience, and would join another with the same kind of fidelity.

Others have simply walked away leaving the institution, its preacher, their fellow Christians and friends without the slightest evidence of care and concern. I have watched them too with sadness, a sadness even for the church to which they now intended to go. Because I was rather sure that they were making a covenant no more profound than the one which they had broken so easily and without flinching.

I suggested at the outset of the sermon that God and Christ treated the covenant of faith as a matter of loyalty, of steadfast endurance. God and Christ do not need to believe in us for their salvation. They do not need us to accomplish their mission. Their faith is not the dependent faith like unto ours. But their loyalty is indispensable to our faith. So they were steadfast and they chose us as their people not for the moment but forever.

The writer of I Timothy, probably written under Paul's name by another, but certainly a person who captured the mind and heart of Paul, has spoken to this kind of loyalty on Christ's part. Paul was judged to be faithful in that he was appointed to the service of Christ. Although he had formerly blasphemed, had persecuted the Christians, had insulted Christ, Christ had judged him to be faithful. Even at present he was to be considered as the foremost of sinners, but he received mercy so that Christ might display perfect patience. Christ had not only forgiven Paul for his former persecution, but even as he remained foremost among sinners, Christ was patient and therefore loyal, patient, enduring, steadfast, always giving to Paul the benefit of the bargain. And the writer implied that if Christ could do so with Paul, he could do so with anyone. The patience of Christ with Paul was an example to all who might believe in the Savior unto eternal life.

Then it was that Paul responded with a doxology, a doxology of loyal lasting and patient praise: To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever, and ever. Amen.

# The Sins of Missing Church

March 28, 1982

*Luke 4:14-30; I Corinthians 12:12-26*

The occasion for this sermon is threefold. First of all, I heard myself telling a student a short while back that missing church might be a greater sin than telling a lie, and I have discovered upon reflection that I was more serious in that statement than I thought at the time I made it. In the second place, the mild flap between some Chapel Hill preachers and the Columbia Broadcasting Company, over the TV scheduling for last Sunday's NCAA quarterfinals, has served to keep the Sunday question in focus. Finally, and most importantly, this is the Easter season, the great season of the church. For the church came to be in the wake of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and, although it does not take the place of Christ, it has been permitted by scripture and tradition to think of itself as the body of Christ in the interval between his ascension and his return at the Parousia.

As to lying and missing church, I am certainly not of a mind to suggest that lying is a small matter but rather that missing church is a bigger matter than we often suppose. Even as I was preparing this sermon, the big lie down in Raleigh took shape; it offers opportunity for debate on either side. How can the state maintain its integrity if it lies to prisoners who have gotten some of their demands by taking hostages and threatening their lives? That this question will and should be argued, being worthy of much conjecture, shows how seriously we take the question of truth and falsehood. Our society is sewn together with the threads of integrity and would quickly unravel should those fibers prove to be the stuff of falsehood.

Granting such premise to be of merit, my suggestion that missing church may be a greater sin than telling a lie is based in part on the fact that the scriptures give instances of lying, without explanation or excuse, which seems to be for the sake of the truth with which the church has been burdened throughout its life and mission. I am saying in effect that the Bible records, may even commend, neglecting to tell the truth for the sake of the ultimate truth.

For example, there lies a tale behind the Ten Commandments to have been received by Moses and told to the people. Shiphrah and Puah were Hebrew midwives ordered by a fearful Pharaoh, because of the high birthrate among the Jews — eventually a threat to his throne — to kill all the male children in whose delivery they assisted. They failed to carry out those orders, and when the Pharaoh asked them for a reason, they replied, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them." That was a lie which may have saved the life of Moses.

Then too, a lie had something to do with the Jews making it into the Promised Land where God was to set them apart as a people for his purpose through the ages. Once again, it was a woman who told the lie, which probably means that women are more perceptive than men, in general, when it comes to recognizing the essentials of a given issue. In any event, Rahab the harlot hid the spies that Joshua had sent into the Promised Land on her roof and under stalks of flax. When the soldiers believed her story, that the spies had already come and gone, and took off in hot pursuit of their trail, she sneaked them back to the safety of Joshua and the Jews. Again she seems to have told a lie for the sake of the truth which was still to be told.

Jesus seems to have adopted some such principle, as told in John 7, when he told his brothers that he was not going to attend a feast of tabernacles since the time had not yet come for him to suffer and die on the cross for the gospel truth and its mission, but when his brothers were out of sight, Jesus went in secret to the feast.

Since it is our justifiable assumption that the church has been burdened with the gospel, therefore the truth, we may be able to say that missing church, that is, failing to support the body which holds that truth, is not only a greater sin than telling a lie, but that

its truth is of such moment for the world that lying may be justified for the sake of the church and its truth.

As to the sin of missing church one of the most common may be explained by Luke's account of Jesus' first visit to his native Nazareth after his baptism and commissioning for his ministry to the world. He did not go to the synagogue to teach or preach on that Sabbath day which got him into so much trouble because of his interpretation of the words of the prophet Isaiah. He went to the synagogue because that was his custom. It is true that most of the time that he went to the synagogue, he wound up teaching and preaching. But Luke tells us what must have been the bottom line, namely, that he would have gone to the synagogue whether or not he was ever asked to teach; he would have gone because that was his custom. In other words, Jesus made a habit of going to synagogue just as in our time he would have made a habit of going to church. Because he went customarily, he went characteristically; to go to worship was a part of the character of the Son of God.

What is done as a matter of habit, customarily and characteristically, is done without thinking. Jesus did not think about whether or not he would go to the synagogue on the Sabbath; he went as a matter of habit.

We should go to church as a matter of habit, as a facet of our character, that which we do customarily and characteristically. And if we do not go, we commit the sin of breaking a habit, of breaking with our character, of living contrarily to the persons we are or profess to be. Of course, I am speaking only to those of us who are members of a church. People who do not belong to a church have no reason to make a habit of attending church. People who do belong to church should go without thinking about it. If any thinking about it is to take place, one should have to think about missing church or not attending church. One should have to come up with reasons for not going to church, which is to suggest a second sin for missing church.

Apart from providential causes and sickness, there are no good reasons for Christians to miss church. A basketball game is not a good reason for missing church. Even a championship game, whether it be North Carolina or Wake Forest is not a good reason for missing church. I do not think the Chapel Hill preachers were

talking to the right parties when protesting the TV schedule of last Sunday. CBS owes nothing to the church. And thus the church owes nothing to CBS except to make certain that the gospel is proclaimed through the world to everyone. Most significantly, CBS did not dare because it did not have to dare. What must always be said therefore, not to CBS, but to Christians is that a basketball game is not a good reason for missing church. I do not consider this to be a rigid posture. I was quite willing to postpone last Sunday's church conference to this Sunday. I watched the game and enjoyed it thoroughly, but I repeat that a basketball game is not a good excuse for missing church.

Some people miss church because of wanting to break the habit of going, which has been mentioned, since that means going without thinking. But much that we do without thinking is part of the formation of character. If going to church is a good habit, then there is no reason to break that habit because we assume that we will then think more about church and it will have more meaning to us. I am willing to say that breaking the habit of church-going in order for it to be more meaningful is not a good reason for missing church. In this case the habit is better than the thought.

Needed to rest because of a hard week? The Lord's day is not a day of rest, not the day respite from creation, but the day of resurrection, thus a day of celebration. Had company? Company should be introduced to what one celebrates most in life.

Think, if you will, of the last excuse you used for missing church and ask if it was an excuse to be proud of, an excuse that you would find acceptable for missing other things. The point to be made here is that missing the central celebration of one's life defies most excuses. The more important the matter the more inane the reason. The foolish maidens missed the wedding party because they did not have enough oil for the lamps. The builder sat on the foundation of the house, defeated because of not counting the cost. The people variously missed the wedding feast because of being married, trying out a new team of oxen, or surveying some land newly purchased.

The sin of excuses is not so much a matter of doing something evil but of missing something essential. Am I speaking of great preaching that is missed? Of course not! It is not easy and never

comfortable for preachers to urge people to attend church knowing, as the preachers do, that it is an invitation to hear them preach. Or at least, that it may be so interpreted. The preacher must remember that the importance of what one does is the telling of the gospel. It is admittedly easier to hear the gospel told well than told without insight or imagination, but I am willing to wager this one thing, most preachers deliver sermons far better than the excuses which people offer for not hearing them.

Perhaps the greatest sin of missing church is that it thereby cripples the church. "The body does not consist of one member but many." No member of the body can say to another I have no need of you. The eye cannot say this to the hand, nor the hand to the eye. Nor does any member of the body say, because I am not some other member of the body but am only what I am, I am not part of the body.

Paul made it clear that no member was so important to the body that it could say to what it deems less important, the body has no need of you, I have no need of you. And he made it clear that no member of the body is so unimportant as to say to the body, I do not count.

When you miss church you make lame and partial the body of Christ. That is precisely what occurs. Now, let us be as honest as is possible. Unlike the physical body, the church can grow another hand or foot, develop another eye or ear, replace even the more unpresentable parts of the body which are all the more indispensable, if and when these members of the body die or take their leave for some other reason. But the church cannot replace any member of the body so long as that member belongs to the church. In its better wisdom and because it is a body of mercy and grace the church has refused through the years to practice surgery on its members. In other words, few churches there are which excommunicate or drop from its rolls the worse members of its body. It limps along, plods along, struggles along with whatever members it has.

Each year in this church, our members go to one another asking for pledges and support. They go to some knowing that they will be scolded for having done so. There are some people who say, "What right do you have to come and ask me for money, I have not

been to church for ten years." The answer is, you are hand, or foot, or eye, or ear; we cannot say to you we have no need of you, and you cannot say to us that you are not a part of the body. So long as any of you, or those not here, are members of the body, then the body is energized by some of you and must carry others as dead weight, but that is what it does. The Church chooses to be a cripple because it is a body of grace.

One of our younger people, studying in our disciples class for possible church membership, was asked with the others to think of what part of the body she saw herself to be. Upon a moment's reflection she answered, "I am a wrinkle." Although a bit young to have grown wrinkles, if and when she does and is still around this church, you may be sure that the church will not bring out its Oil of Olay, (I am glad you cannot see the spelling, I have not learned how to spell *olay*), it will not try to smooth out its wrinkles. One of the beautiful characteristics of the church is that it does have its wrinkles, the wrinkles of experience, of stored wisdom, of the long trials, of being beaten by the elements of life in the world; she is indeed a wrinkled body and has been around for a long time. But as we all know, wrinkles are often the conduits of kindness and grace. The church could not do without its wrinkles.

# A Gospel of Grace and Judgment

*February 10, 1980*

*Mark 1:9-15; Romans 5:1-11*

The Church owes everyone — saint and sinner alike — faithful proclamation of an honest gospel. The same is true for any church, but since this is the one for which we are mostly responsible, let us talk of the matter as it concerns us. We must rededicate ourselves to preaching an honest gospel, and so much so as to resolve that, if and when the gospel is mishandled to the extent of being robbed of its integrity, our patience will grow to be as thin and brittle as a Moravian cookie.

A gospel becomes dishonest when its basic elements are obscured, set aside, or replaced in order to win adherents to whatever surrogate gospel is presented in the place of the honest one. For the purpose of establishing some criterion of measuring its integrity, it may be asserted that if a gospel is to be honest, it must contain the factors of judgement and grace. To the degree that these essentials are present, the gospel will likely be an honest one.

The 14th and 15th verses of Mark's testament read like this:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Let there be no mistaking the matter; the gospel has to do with the kingdom of God, and all people are judged in the light of their loyalty to such a kingdom. Here is one of the first instances in which the gospel is misrepresented, mostly by those who revel in relevance. It is not for us to decide whether the gospel is relevant or

not, but we may be sure that if we strain to make it relevant, we are liable to sift out some of its essential ingredients, leaving only an insipid taste in the place of the fine wine of its truth.

But there are those who persist in diluting the gospel because the kingdom of God is deemed to be irrelevant to the needs of modern men and women. Given a world situation in which the kingdoms of East and West are struggling for dominance or survival — it is hard to tell one from the other — allegiance to the kingdom of God seems far removed from what is pertinent to the times. Many of us agree that we need to straighten out the kingdoms of earth before we bother with the kingdom of heaven.

It is also averred that the kingdom of God idea is a hard one to communicate. Thus it is that McLuhan's madness, about the medium being the message, has convinced us that we must "become all things to all men so that by all means we might communicate to some." And we are confirmed in this effort when others say to us that they have had no experience with God's kingdom, do not know what it is about, or where we are coming from when we talk about it. Since we must by all means communicate, it then becomes necessary to sell our kingdom birthright for a mess of media or a cup of communication. As a result, we have forgotten the truth that without the kingdom of God there is no gospel to be proclaimed, and that any gospel preached to the contrary is nothing more than the relevant rehearsal of doggerel drama.

The proclamation of an honest gospel is also complicated by its stubborn bias that the initial effect of the good news should be one of repentance. This also is met frequently with ears that do not hear. How many times have we heard, in recent years, that repentance of sin has no place in a modern vocabulary. The present view of religion, of any kind, is that it should be a tool for problem-solving. The matter of becoming a new person, as a result of the saving act of Christ, is of little moment to an individual who wishes to remain the same person he is but is amenable to receiving a little bit of help along the way. Years ago, Rabbi Liebmann put many of our minds at rest when he intimated in his *Peace of Mind* that one did not have to repent of his sins if he would find a way of outgrowing them. Thereby religion was cast as a remedy much like one which overcomes a baby's colic by means of maturation.

Mark preached to the contrary when interpreting what Jesus came to Galilee to preach. The sermon is that repentance is the very first step in the process of believing the good news. "Repent and believe in the gospel" is what it says, and there is the clear intimation that repenting is necessary to believing. The paradox keeps punching us to get our attention; if the good news is to be heard, it asserts, it will be heard by one who repents. Paul picked at the Romans with the prongs of this paradox. "Do you," he asked, "presume upon the riches of his kindness and forebearance and patience? Do you know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

I know no one — do you? — absolutely no one believing now in the gospel who did not repent when he first heard it.

So far, I have described the gospel in a tough-minded way, one stubbornly connected with God's kingdom and unyielding in its demand for repentance. But like the shepherds, who shook with fear when first they heard the good news, we also are not so much surprised by the awful power of the holy — that is to be expected — as we are surprised by the love of the Holy One. Judgment calls for repentance, the repentance is the ground of belief, and belief in the gospel is to be overwhelmed by the merciful love of God.

Paul is matchless in his understanding thereto:

While we were yet helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man — though perhaps for a good man one will even dare to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Paul let out all the stops in describing a condition of one less likely to be saved. Look at his score: helpless, ungodly, sinful, and enemies of God. No chance for any one in that shape, is there? The phrase that may spark our possible understanding is "at the right time." Our Job-like egos convince us, as it did the patriarch, that the right time is when, face to face with God, we shall be able to argue the rightness of our ways before him. How did Job put it? "This will

be my salvation, that a godless man shall not come before him." Or, if we are made of gentler stuff, we can see ourselves as the sheep, given the kingdom of God on the last day, because we have done our quota of kind deeds. That will be the right time, let Christ die for us then, when we are somewhat worthy, at least, of his sacrifice.

But no, this is not the right time for God or Christ. The right time is while we were yet helpless, ungodly, sinful and hostile to the holy — that was the right time for him to die, and in him for God to reconcile the world unto himself. So it is that just about the time that we are made willing to think in terms of God's kingdom, to accept its judgment, to repent and thus believe — just about that time, we find that grace is the foundation supporting the whole business of our salvation. We find that it is there even if we do not feel judged, do not repent, are not prepared to believe, and there it reconciles us and brings us to salvation.

This is too hard to take. And we are heard to say, "Surely we have to do something. This puts all the burden on Christ and it makes us ashamed. Give us something to do. Let us be judged and satisfy the court of the holy. Let us repent, let us believe. Let us get baptized anew by the Holy Spirit. And beneath our protestations there is surely the desire that we shall be able to do something so that we may take some credit for our salvation and feel better about the transaction. But if the gospel is honest, our credits will not be tallied; we will be forced to quit thinking of ourselves, and of our deeds whether good or bad, and as to whether or not we are ashamed, for we will have no room for any other than to be grateful for the grace by which we are saved.

Let us look at some of the ways in which some of us might and could respond to an honest gospel.

Wake Forest University students are a good place to begin. This is not to say that the rest of us, faculty, administration, townspeople, preachers, or whatever, are faultless, but let us take the risk of confronting students, a practice less popular than that of courting them for religious purposes.

I am afraid that the gospel of individual happiness and realization has been preached to students here and that it is this gospel to which they respond rather than to that of the kingdom of God. Now the kingdom of God is a great mystery in the gospel. It is here

but yet to come. It must be lived here and yet in the life beyond. One must be born from above in order to see and enter it. At the last day, the question of kind deeds as a ministry to Jesus will be asked. Even when one is brought to the kingdom by grace, inappropriate garments for kingdom wear may cause the person to be thrown out into the streets.

These are not easy matters with which to deal. And yet I am impressed with how many students are able to disengage themselves from so great a mystery, turn to the measure of their individual feelings, accept an inerrant Bible and the baptism of the Spirit, and believe that they have finished their course. Despite the fact that an array of capable professors still confess to having much to learn about the mystery of the Christian faith, many students have not in any way repented of their religious ignorance respecting faith. And it is of no small matter that the religious students are sometimes more ignorant of Christianity than are the nonreligious ones. Unless and until there is repentance for the oversimplification of the gospel, students are not likely to believe in the gospel because they will have no idea as to what it is.

But let me say that even in their misrepresentations of the gospel, they will be saved at the right time by God's grace.

Or to speak of another category: when the oppressed hear the good news, they have reason to believe that their station in this life will be improved. And their oppressors, if hearing the gospel, will certainly feel judged and, let us trust, will repent of their exploitation of the weak. But this is not the whole of the story. For, if the gospel is truly heard, the oppressed, in reaching a better station in life, will be judged if they assume that their social and economic good fortune is a sign that the kingdom of God has arrived. God is not more black than he is white, no poorer than rich, and no more a Democrat than a Republican — despite some arguments I am sure to hear to the contrary.

Unless the gospel is heard so that the oppressors are willing to give away some of their advantages in this life and so that the oppressed will not be satisfied with those advantages in the place of life in the kingdom of God, the gospel will be heard to no avail. If the poor would rather be rich than saved, would rather have bread than the bread of life, the gospel has not been heard. But the

moment the rich preach such a gospel to the poor, they have distorted its truth. The needle is still too small for the camel.

And in the end there must be the understanding of grace. For whether rich or poor, black or white, at the right time, all are reconciled to God by the death of Christ and are being saved by his life. If you are bothered by the paradoxes herein, the gospel is intended to keep you and me off balance, so that we realize that we are saved by grace.







